

MYSTERY NEWS

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Does reading the daily paper sometimes leave you utterly baffled? Do you feel that you actually know less afterwards than you did before?

Our thoughts are inspired by a dispatch recently distributed by one of the major American news-gathering services. The full text of the story, as it appeared in newspapers, follows:

Medical researchers from the University of Cincinnati revealed Tuesday they have found traces of cadmium, a potentially dangerous metal, in the hair of 200 urban Cincinnatians. Dr. Harold Petering, associate professor of environmental health, said cadmium could be very dangerous to man. He said the amount found in the subjects' hair was low, but increased continuously from birth to old age.

The account fascinates, not so much with what it tells us as with what it fails to tell us. Any layman of average or better intelligence, reading the article, will ask all sorts of questions. For example:

- (1) Why is the presence of cadmium in human hair, presumably in microscopic amounts, a danger? What illnesses does it cause?
- (2) How did the cadmium get into the hair of the subjects tested? If the phenomenon is unusual, indicated by the fact that it was considered newsworthy, there must be a story behind it. Certainly, it isn't common knowledge, or possibly even esoteric knowledge, that cadmium is a normal constituent of the air that surrounds us.
- (3) Is the cadmium radioactive? That is, could it be the result of atomic fallout? Is that what makes it dangerous?
- (4) Were the 200 Cincinnatians selected purely at random, or were they primarily factory workers of some kind exposed to cadmium contamination as an occupational hazard?
- (5) If the selection was entirely random, as the account seems to imply, why was the hair of the subjects tested for cadmium, of all things? Did the researchers test for the presence of many

different substances, or did they have some reason to suspect that they might find cadmium? What was that reason?

- (6) Why did the cadmium settle in hair, rather than in some other part of the body?
- (7) The study was made in Cincinnati. Should we attribute special significance to that circumstance, or is it reasonable to suppose that research in other cities would show similar results? In short, does the peril concern all large-city dwellers?
- (8) Is there anything the ordinary citizen can or should do to protect himself against this new menace to life?
- (9) Urban Cincinnatians? These are evidently being distinguished from rural Cincinnatians. Of course, Cincinnati, Ohio is a major metropolis, with a population of about half a million, so that the picture of rural Cincinnatians peacefully pursuing their rustic ways is a contradiction in terms, and the word urban is surely redundant.

Like a bolt from the blue, the news item quoted hits the reader, suggesting that his health is in jeopardy, and evoking a torrent of questions to which no answers are provided. Those connected with the research know what it is all about, but at least 99 per cent of all newspaper readers haven't the foggiest notion. Whoever wrote the dispatch must have realized that he would perplex readers instead of enlightening them, and make them feel ignorant rather than informed.

Fortunately for our mental and emotional well-being, most newspaper articles serve the function of the press: to disseminate information. An occasional story such as the one examined here serves a diametrically opposite purpose: to bewilder and to tantalize.

Journalists, take note!