



Medicine, the Law & You

DR SYLVESTER
ONZIVUA
sonzivua@gmail.com

Death from poisoning



TOXIC SUBSTANCES. When one dies after showing signs of tummy upset, poisoning cannot be ruled out.

At 9.21 pm on the night of November 22, 2006, Alexander Litvinenko died at the University College Hospital in central London when his heart failed. He was a former officer of the Russian security services who had been given political asylum in the United Kingdom after fleeing his native country, Russia.

Sudden illness

Litvinenko's illness was of sudden onset, three weeks earlier, on 1, November. On that day he had met with two former Russian security officers and also had lunch with an Italian. For several days after November 1, Litvinenko experienced severe abdominal pain, diarrhea and vomiting. At one point he could not walk without assistance and on 3 November, an ambulance was called and he was taken to Barnet General Hospital, London. It was from here that he was moved to the University College Hospital from where he was later ad-

mitted to the Intensive Care Unit of the hospital. Litvinenko's condition worsened as doctor's searched for the cause of his illness. He became physically weak and unconscious some of the time.

The patient's urine and blood samples were sent to a specialised laboratory to test for radioactive poisons. On the evening of November 22, shortly before the patient died, his doctors were informed that the poison was likely to be a radioactive substance known as polonium, a critical element of the early nuclear bombs.

Further tests on a larger urine sample confirmed the result the following day. This was the first documented case where polonium was

A REAL POISON

- It should be colourless, without odour and taste so that it can be added to a drink or food without raising suspicion.
- It should be highly toxic in order to achieve the purpose for which it is administered.
- The signs and symptoms should resemble a natural disease and should not be detected at a postmortem examination
- The serious side effects of the poison should be delayed to allow for escape of the person who administered it.
- It should be rapidly destroyed in the body so that should not be detected easily.

used as a poison and it was thought that the poison was administered in Litvinenko's cup of tea. At the post-mortem examination Litvinenko's body had five times the lethal dose of polonium.

An article attributed to Litvinenko was published two days after his death and in it he stated "this may be the time to say one or two things to the person responsible for my present condition. You may succeed in silencing me but that silence comes at a price. You have shown yourself to be as barbaric and ruthless as your most hostile critics have claimed.

You have shown yourself to have no respect for life, liberty or any civilised value. You have shown yourself to be unworthy of your office, to be

unworthy of the trust of civilized men and women. You may succeed in silencing one man but the howl of protest around the world will reverberate in your ears for the rest of your life."

Polonium is a rare, unstable and therefore highly radioactive metal. This means that the metal loses energy by emitting particles, also known as radiation, that can cause immense damage to the human body. Radiation is the emission of energy in the form of waves or particles. Polonium is named after Poland, the homeland of Marie Curie, who discovered the metal.

Harmful chemicals

A poison is any substance which when introduced in the living body or is brought into contact with any part of the body can or will produce ill health or death. Toxicology is the study of poisons, of which there are several branches. Forensic toxicology deals with the medical and legal aspects of harmful chemicals on human beings. This also includes performing postmortems in which death is suspected to have been caused by a poison.

Clinical toxicology deals with human diseases caused by or associated with abnormal exposure to poisons. Analytical toxicology pertains to the laboratory study, investigation of and evaluation into the nature and quantification of poisons. This is done in specialised laboratories. Environmental toxicology, occupational toxicology and ecotoxicology are some of the specialised branches of toxicology.

Polonium is close to the ideal poison. An idea poison should have no antidote or should be very difficult to treat. It should be cheap and readily available. This, however is not so with Polonium.

to be continued...

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