

from The New Yorker

July 12, 1999
TALK OF THE TOWN

Dept. of Straight Thinking

Is the Belgian Coca-Cola hysteria the real thing?

by Malcolm Gladwell

The wave of illness among Belgian children last month had the look and feel--in the beginning, at least--of an utterly typical food poisoning outbreak. First, forty-two children in the Belgian town of Bornem became mysteriously ill after drinking Coca-Cola and had to be hospitalized. Two days later, eight more school children fell sick in Bruges, followed by thirteen in Harelbeke the next day and forty two in Lochristi three days after that--and on and on in a widening spiral that, in the end, sent more than one hundred children to the hospital complaining of nausea, dizziness, and headaches, and forced Coca-Cola into the biggest product recall in its hundred-and-thirteen-year history. Upon investigation, an apparent culprit was found. In the Coca-Cola plant in Antwerp, contaminated carbon dioxide had been used to carbonate a batch of the soda's famous syrup. With analysts predicting that the

scare would make a dent in Coca-Cola's quarterly earnings, the soft-drink giant apologized to the Belgian people, and the world received a sobering reminder of the fragility of food safety.

The case isn't as simple as it seems, though. A scientific study ordered by Coca-Cola found that the contaminants in the carbon dioxide were sulfur compounds left over from the production process. In the tainted bottles of Coke, these residues were present at between five and seventeen parts per billion. These sulfides can cause illness, however, only at levels about a thousand times greater than that. At seventeen parts per billion, they simply leave a bad smell--like rotten eggs--which means that Belgium should have experienced nothing more than a minor epidemic of nose-wrinkling. More puzzling is the fact that, in four of the five schools were the bad Coke allegedly struck, half of the kids who got sick hadn't drunk any Coke that

day. Whatever went on in Belgium, in other words, probably wasn't Coca-Cola poisoning. So what was it? Maybe nothing at all.

"You know, when this business started I bet two of my friends a bottle of champagne each that I knew the cause," Simon Wessely, a psychiatrist who teaches at the King's College School of Medicine in London, said.

"It's quite simple. It's just mass hysteria. These things usually are."

Wessely has been collecting reports of this kind of hysteria for about ten years and now has hundreds of examples, dating back as far as 1787, when millworkers in Lancashire suddenly took ill after they became persuaded that they were being poisoned by tainted cotton. According to Wessely, almost all cases fit a pattern. Someone sees a neighbor fall ill and becomes convinced that he is being

contaminated by some unseen evil--in the past it was demons and spirits; nowadays it tends to be toxins and gases--and his fear makes him anxious. His anxiety makes him dizzy and nauseous. He begins to hyperventilate. He collapses. Other people hear the same allegation, see the "victim" faint, and they begin to get anxious themselves. They feel nauseous. They hyperventilate. They collapse, and before you know it everyone in the room is hyperventilating and collapsing. These symptoms, Wessely stresses, are perfectly genuine. It's just that they are manifestations of a threat that is wholly imagined. "This kind of thing is extremely common," he says, "and it's almost normal. It doesn't mean that you are mentally ill or crazy."

Mass hysteria comes in several forms. Mass motor hysteria, for example, involves specific physical movements: shaking, tremors, and convulsions. According to the sociologist Robert Bartholomew, motor hysteria often occurs in environments of strict emotional repression; it was common in medieval nunneries and in nineteenth-century European schools, and it is seen today in some Islamic

cultures. What happened in Belgium, he says, is a fairly typical example of a more standard form of contagious anxiety, possibly heightened by the recent Belgian scare over dioxin-contaminated animal feed. The students' alarm over the rotten-egg odor of their Cokes, for example, is straight out of the hysteria textbooks. "The vast majority of these events are triggered by some abnormal but benign smell," Wessely said. "Something strange, like a weird odor coming from the air conditioning."

The fact that the outbreaks occurred in schools is also typical of hysteria cases. "The classic ones always involve schoolchildren," Wessely continued. "There is a famous British case involving hundreds of schoolgirls who collapsed during a 1980 Nottinghamshire jazz festival. They blamed it on a local farmer spraying pesticides." Bartholomew has just published a paper on a hundred and fifteen documented hysteria cases in schools over the past three hundred years. As anyone who has ever been to a rock concert knows, large numbers of adolescents in confined spaces seem to be particularly susceptible to mass hysteria. Those intent on pointing the finger at Coca-Cola in this sorry business ought to remember that. "We let the people of Belgium down,"

Douglas Ivester, the company's chairman, said in the midst of the crisis. Or perhaps it was the other way around.

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