

Will our grandchildren still use poisons to clean their homes?

In the wake of Cyclone Yasi, a key issue that we all had to deal with was the threat of contamination and disease. It is an unfortunate reality, that when things go wrong with water and sewerage infrastructure – as can happen during events like Cyclone Yasi—we can very quickly be up close and personal with things which could make us sick.

There is no doubt that we benefit from a range of public health measures which help us control things like fungal diseases, e. coli and other outbreaks – some of which could be very serious if we did not have these measures. For example, drinking water supplies can easily be contaminated when pipes are broken or pumps fail. Chlorination and other measures are introduced to our water supplies routinely in order to help overcome most contaminants. In most cases this keeps us safe. After Cyclone Yasi, most of us were quickly able to access clean water and the community at large was not negatively impacted by contamination. But the event does serve to raise the issue of how we deal with things that would make us sick on a daily basis.

During the aftermath of Yasi I met coincidentally with two people who have been impacted by contamination which got past their defences. Both of these people had contracted infections while in hospital for other reasons. Those infections resisted the best of our weapons (antibiotics and sterilisation protocols) for many months. Both people are still incapacitated to some extent as a result. Unfortunately, in our efforts to stave off contamination and disease, we have unwittingly painted ourselves into something of a corner. We are now faced with a number of situations where nothing we do seems to control some forms of contamination. To find out why, we need to take another look at how we go about staying clean. Almost everything we use to keep things clean kills something else. In fact, we don't think things are clean unless everything 'bad' or 'dirty' dies when we clean – or unless we think it dies.

Most cleaning products claim to "kill 99% of germs". What is not said is what else they kill on the surface when we use them too. We make the assumption that only the germs die. But this is not the case. This concept of "kill everything clean" has become all pervasive. As someone said to me recently "does it nuke everything? If not you can't help me!" Unfortunately, this approach may work in atom bombs, but it does not work with microbes. For a start, nothing kills everything. These critters we worry about are amazingly tiny, almost infinitely adaptive and can survive in the air, on virtually everything and in virtually everything.

All we do is thin them out for a while. It is also a little naïve to think that we could be in this type of a war with "bad bugs" and the bugs would not bite back. In fact, killing bugs does two things: It encourages those which survive to adapt and it leaves blank spaces which are fertile ground for re-infection. It is a frightening truth that some very nasty microbes have adapted so well to some of the strongest antibiotics, that they apparently now eat them! Around the home, the fear of contamination has led us to depend upon an increasingly poisonous array of weapons. As a parent, one question which has always perplexed me is why we feel it is ok to clean our homes with products which we lock up and assiduously hide away for fear that our kids will be hurt by them.

Some products used in household cleaning actually come with warnings that they should not be touched, breathed or otherwise contacted. Yet we spray them around our kids and wipe surfaces with them that children come in contact with. It seems the fear of contamination has driven us to a rather extreme response. The concept that we might actually be creating a worse long term situation by



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constantly using these types of cleaners for an instant and deadly reaction is not new. Neither is the concept that there might be other ways to deal with the issue. In fact, there is plenty of literature which tells us that it is possible to keep things clean and healthy using things like vinegar and bicarbonate to clean with – although most people find that difficult to believe.

Nature contains numerous examples of plants, animals and microbes which produce substances which are very effective at maintaining a 'clean' environment. Most plants have defences against fungal infections. In fact, most living things have natural defences against disease agents. That is why the planet is not dominated by those 'bad bugs'. It has long been known that it is possible to use the defences used by plants to help us counteract some 'germs'. Many popular cleaning products these days contain things like citrus oils for example.

What we may not have thought is that some microbes are actually down in the trenches with 'bad bugs' every day. And they are on our side! That is, there are microbes which have strategies to contain, control and sometimes even eliminate 'bad bugs'. And they do this for us every day and all the time. Things like lactobacillus (which produce lactic acid and hydrogen peroxide – two very powerful disinfectants) survive by directly combating things which would hurt us. In the war on contamination, these guys are very valuable allies. There are already products on the market which work with plant extracts.

Recently a range of products have appeared which also work with and support the powerful allies we have in the microbial world as a way to help keep things clean. Combining plant defences with these microbial allies makes for a formidable defence mechanism and can be extremely powerful. There is evidence to suggest that the 'clean' that this approach provides actually lasts much longer than the 'clean' provided by nuking everything in sight. At present there is still a perception that cleaning products which don't contain some form of powerful chemical agent can't possibly keep things clean. But this perception is wavering. As someone said to me today "if it isn't poisonous, it doesn't usually work—but I'm willing to try it".

There is a bit of a vicious circle here – cleaning products which contain poisons are cheaper because we like them and we like them partly because they are cheaper. However as more products arrive on the market which do the job without the poison, it is becoming clear that this is a deadlock which can be broken. It also makes sense for us to enlist a little mercenary assistance in the fight against disease. Why do the job by ourselves? Good bugs keep us healthy on the inside, why would we think they can't do it on the outside too? And around us in the home? There is clearly scope – within the general framework of community health to investigate the use of cleaning products which do the cleaning job without killing indiscriminately. If there is something which can clean grime off surfaces and discourage contamination by disease agents, without necessarily knocking down everything within range, and without being poisonous to the kids, this could well be a better way to attack the whole concept.

Some products like this are made right here in Townsville. Why not give them a try? You don't have to sell the farm, to do it. And who knows, you may even grow to like using things which encourage the little guys that work to keep us clean and our children safe without us ever seeing them!

- KEN BELLAMY

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