Mercury in fiction: Human Health Effects

Read Chapter 7 of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll. In this chapter, Alice meets the Mad Hatter. Once you have finished the chapter, answer the questions below.

1. **Where did the term “Mad Hatter” come from?**

When Lewis Carroll was writing Alice in Wonderland in 1865, people in Britain who made hats were called Hatters.[[1]](#footnote-1) They worked in in poorly ventilated rooms, using hot solutions of mercuric nitrate to shape wool felt hats which led them to having high mercury exposure. These Hatters or hat-makers commonly exhibited slurred speech, tremors, irritability, shyness, depression, and other neurological symptoms; hence the expression "mad as a hatter." The symptoms were associated with chronic occupational exposure to mercury.

1. **What are the symptoms of mercury poisoning?** (Hint: read “The Basics” about mercury and human health from the National Institutes of Health <http://kidsenvirohealth.nlm.nih.gov/subtopic/002/chemicals/017/mercury/> )
   1. Tremors (trembling)
   2. Psychosis (losing touch with reality)
   3. Changes in vision or hearing
   4. Memory loss
   5. Loss of appetite (not feeling hungry)
   6. Feeling irritated
2. **Write down three sentences or paragraphs from the chapter that show or describe a symptom of mercury exposure. After the sentence, write the symptom it is describing.**

Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. [**Loss of appetite**]

“The Hatter was the first to break the silence. `What day of the month is it?' he said, turning to Alice: he had taken his watch out of his pocket, and was looking at it uneasily, shaking it every now and then, and holding it to his ear.” [**Memory loss**]

`Your hair wants cutting,' said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech.

`You should learn not to make personal remarks,' Alice said with some severity; `it's very rude.' [**Irritability**]

`Two days wrong!' sighed the Hatter. `I told you butter wouldn't suit the works!' he added looking angrily at the March Hare.

`It was the *best* butter,' the March Hare meekly replied.

`Yes, but some crumbs must have got in as well,' the Hatter grumbled: `you shouldn't have put it in with the bread-knife.'

The March Hare took the watch and looked at it gloomily: then he dipped it into his cup of tea, and looked at it again: but he could think of nothing better to say than his first remark, `It was the *best* butter, you know.' [**Irritability**]

Alice had been looking over his shoulder with some curiosity. `What a funny watch!' she remarked. `It tells the day of the month, and doesn't tell what o'clock it is!'

`Why should it?' muttered the Hatter. `Does *your* watch tell you what year it is?'

`Of course not,' Alice replied very readily: `but that's because it stays the same year for such a long time together.'

`Which is just the case with *mine*,' said the Hatter.

Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter's remark seemed to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English. `I don't quite understand you,' she said, as politely as she could. [**Psychosis – losing touch with reality**]

`If you knew Time as well as I do,' said the Hatter, `you wouldn't talk about wasting *it*. It's *him*.'

`I don't know what you mean,' said Alice.

`Of course you don't!' the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. `I dare say you never even spoke to Time!' [**Psychosis – losing touch with reality**]

`You can draw water out of a water-well,' said the Hatter; `so I should think you could draw treacle out of a treacle-well--eh, stupid?' [[2]](#endnote-1)[**Irritability**]

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