



## **A "Restful" Cruise Off the Spanish Peninsula**



By Eleanor Rodgerson, MD

At first, what fussed me was the absence of my electric toothbrush. But that concern quickly became temporary. Sailing around the Spanish Peninsula was the new experience and a small French ship made it memorable: helpful crew, exceptional food, stop-offs at historical sights. The sailing was steady, smooth all the way from Lisbon to Nice, a trace of shore to the left, boundless gray sea to the right.

The young looking Captain pointed out he had 15 years of experience and, after a practice life preserver drill, worries of ship worthiness disappeared.

Soon though, an unforeseen snag in pleasure made itself evident. Distress over a lack of a toothbrush was forgotten. A traveler sickened, a "cold." I heaved a sigh and groaned. The future would be no mystery.

At breakfast, I sat as far away as the table would allow. Here was the beginning of a small epidemic. It was inevitable that infection would sweep the ship.

The contagious disease watchers at home have issued their warnings to deaf ears. Remember the 1918 flu? SARS? Bird Flu? Weren't birds actually being killed by the thousands right now to prevent spread of disease? Wasn't there an attempt in Indonesia to check on travelers' temperatures as they passed through the entrance to the airlines?

Before long, others on the ship missed meals and lectures. The ship's doctor trod the corridors dispensing antibiotics and sedatives and cough medicine. "How is so-and-so feeling today?" became the usual greeting.

I was reminded of the past in historical maternity when bacteria were unrecognized and hospitals were places of death. Later, with more knowledge of disease, there was a reversal, hospitals became safer, and care went so far as to build institutions for maternity cases alone. (Recall Sacramento's Sutter Maternity Hospital - the first maternity hospital west of the Mississippi.)

But practical considerations intruded. Other specialties needed space, and the happy maternity experience demanded relatives be allowed in the delivery room. Bacteria and viruses crept in also. They couldn't be seen, but they were there and they multiplied. Danger and risk returned. All effort soon went to develop drugs to fight these organisms.

There is no mystery about what has happened. Placid bacteria have become lethal. They know how to fight for their survival.

And how does this history connect with a sail to Spain and Portugal?

That first infection with a traveler came from somewhere, and left its mark. Later, it would leave the ship for land and home. A small skirmish could become a large one.

Don't we believe what we are told by experts? The warnings? The safety precautions?

What is the answer?

Is it to deny admittance to the traveler with the "cold"? Or, is it to isolate that traveler?  
Whatever is done, shouldn't the healthy be protected?

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