

BEGINNING

In the 1950s, an American anthropologist went to the Congo & encountered Pygmies. One day a tribesman pointed to a cloud of billowing dust on the horizon & began shouting – ‘Giant dragonflies! ‘Giant dragonflies!’ As the cloud grew closer, an outline of stampeding elephants took shape. The Anthropologist said:

‘Those **aren’t** dragonflies, they’re **elephants!**’, to which the Pygmy replied: ‘**Look!** The **giant** dragonflies – they’ve have **turned** into elephants!’

Human beings are... prone to self-deception.

We’ve all been there... **SLIDE 2**

& when you become an **adult** – these creatures are **replaced by other beings**

—

SLIDE 3

18% of Americans believe in Alien abductions

SLIDE 4

13% believe BF is real (despite no fossils, body, bones/DNA evidence)

In NZ – we have our own version of BF – the ‘Coromandel Man.’

SLIDE 5

During the late 1800s – there were MANY sightings of giant crocodiles in the Waikato River

SLIDE 6 & 7

Most likely misidentifications triggered by hoaxes.

Some conspiracy theories are FUNNY – others are NOT – **SLIDE 8** – like the claims in Samoa in 2019 that led parents to stop vaccinating children. It resulted in 83 preventable deaths.

YES - we are prone to deception because our brains are wired to connect dots & see meaning – even when there is none. Like the Face on Mars.

SLIDE 9 - SLIDE 10 – which turned out to be an optical illusion caused by shadows and lighting. – SLIDE 11

In 1894 (**SLIDE 12**) American Astronomer Percival Lowell peered through his telescope – & mapped out a complex system of canals. (**SLIDE 13**)

It was later discovered that these were a figment of his imagination. SLIDE 14

SLIDE 15 In 1977, Maria Rubio, a devout Catholic, burned a tortilla while cooking & was convinced it was the face of Jesus. (Close up) **SLIDE 16**

Throughout history people have believed things that have **no** basis in reality...

(**SLIDE 17**)

Whether it's witches, demons or illness caused by
wind turbines
Wi-Fi
5G Towers
or mobile phones.

We are also prone to psychosomatic reactions – through mass suggestion

During the **anti-vaccine** protests in Wellington in 2022 (**SLIDE 18**)

several protestors claimed police deployed concrete barriers that were emitting **electromagnetic** radiation that was making them sick. Many said their symptoms went away when they left for the night – only to reappear on their return. As a result – some were donning tinfoil hats.

In 2018 (**SLIDE 19**) 33 children at a primary school – north of Wellington – fell sick after a bad smell swept the grounds amid fears of a terrorist attack. Ten were hospitalized with – Headaches, dizziness, nausea, skin irritation & vomiting. Police eventually concluded (**SLIDE 20**) the outbreak was triggered by the delivery of mushroom compost next to the school.

In 2016 – (SLIDE 21) students in Hastings were swimming when 40 fell sick with headaches, nausea & vomiting. All quickly recovered. (**SLIDE 22**) Water tests were normal & Pool staff who had been in the water, were unaffected. It turns out – the 1st student was unwell & vomited – and the rest grew anxious believing his illness was from the water. Despite the words “mass vomiting” in the headlines – MOST did NOT vomit.

**Our state of mind drives our perceptions.
& our beliefs drive our health complaints**

Outbreaks of Mass Psychogenic Illness never appear spontaneously – they result from a unique set of circumstances. It is the job of the researcher to examine the context & identify the anxieties driving ANY particular episode.

SLIDE 23

In August 2017, the American State Department announced that it was investigating a mysterious illness cluster among its staff at their Embassy in Havana, Cuba. They suspected it was a **secret** ENERGY weapon that used **sound** waves to make people sick. Over the next **several** years – **dozens** of American & Canadian Embassy staff in Havana – reported hearing **strange** sounds and feeling unwell. President Trump & **several** U.S. Senators blamed the Cubans – who were thought to be working with the Russians or Chinese. Before long, 1,500 similar attacks were reported by American Government staff all over the world.

In **March** 2023 – after spending 6 years & 10s of millions of dollars investigating what became known as ‘Havana Syndrome’ – the intelligence community – including the FBI & the CIA – concluded that ‘Havana Syndrome’ was a MYTH – a socially constructed catch-all category for an **array** of health conditions and stress reactions that had been lumped under a single label.

4 years EARLIER –

SLIDE 24

UCLA Neurologist Robert Baloh & MYSELF published an article in **The Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine** – concluding that ‘Havana Syndrome’ was a myth – a socially constructed catch-all category for an array of health conditions and stress reactions that had been lumped under a single label.

NOW...

You might be thinking – if the U.S. Government had paid MORE attention to our study – they could have saved themselves a lot of MONEY. But you’d be wrong.

Because in 2018 – 2 studies – one by the FBI & one by a group of scientists working covertly for the Government – Both concluded that HS was almost certainly a result of MASS SUGGESTION – but those reports were kept classified.

Meanwhile, politicians – who would have seen these reports – kept peddling claims that a foreign adversary was attacking US diplomats & spies.

In October 2021,

SLIDE 25

Congress even passed a law giving millions in compensation for victims of Havana Syndrome – & they are still paying.

So if the intelligence agencies have deemed HS a myth – why is the US Govt. still paying compensation?

SLIDE 26

Former CIA Director Bill BURNS

was asked that VERY QUESTION – his response –

‘Well – I guess it’s only fair as we encouraged the idea that they were being attacked – even though – there was **NO evidence** they were.’

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The real mystery of Havana Syndrome is HOW **bad** Government, **bad** science & **bad** journalism – kept this MYTH alive for so long.

& how the media peddled it – The NYTs, Wash Post, NZ Herald, NBC News, CBS & CNN – They ALL got it wrong.

They kept reporting that the diplomats in Cuba were suffering from brain damage – that was NEVER demonstrated.

The **REAL** story is even **more** extraordinary than the existence of any imaginary ray gun firing a sonic or microwave energy beam.

MIDDLE

So, let’s start at the beginning... (SLIDE 27)

In 2015 – when Barack Obama opened the US Embassy in Havana –

The staff were counselled to be on alert BECAUSE in the **past** US diplomats were **aggressively** harassed by the CUBANS. (SLIDE 28)

-- You would be assigned a house -- get **up** in the morning – & there would be cigarette butts on your kitchen table – & you don’t smoke.

There would be **dog** pooh on your kitchen floor & you don’t have a dog.

Books on your shelf would be rearranged.

So when the diplomats & undercover CIA officers arrived in 2015 – they found themselves in a **hostile** country & under **constant** surveillance. This created **social** paranoia -----

- causing them to be on a constant, **high** state of alert.

Then In late 2016, CIA officers in Havana, noticed **strange** sounds near their homes.... & it became the subject of much speculation.

In December - **one of the agents**

complained of a headache, ear pain & difficulty hearing – & went to the Embassy Clinic, convinced he had been attacked by a new weapon using sound waves – even though THESE were **common** symptoms that would be presented in GP Offices – **every** day – **all** over the world.

THIS IS HIM HERE --- **(SLIDE 29)**

He then **actively** lobbied others -- that the mysterious sounds may have been responsible for other illnesses that **covert** agents & embassy staff may have been experienced since arriving in Havana.

We **know** this because a well-known CIA officer who was in Havana at the time – later said that ‘**patient zero**’ (ADAM) – began aggressively lobbying his colleagues to report **any** unusual symptoms.

ADAM then attended a New Year’s gathering – at which he went around **playing** the recording of the sound he heard when he became unwell. That recording was later determined to have been from a cricket. **(SLIDE 30)**

In fact -- of the first **21 victims** in Cuba who reported feeling unwell and hearing sounds – 8 recorded their attacks. **(SLIDE 31)**

Those recordings were analyzed by a group of Government scientists who concluded they were the **mating** call of the Indies short-tailed cricket.

THIS REPORT WAS KEPT classified until YEARS LATER. (Sept 2021)

So unbeknownst to the victims that what they were hearing cricket sounds – Embassy officials warned THEM that they may be the subject of a targeted attack with a sonic weapon – and to avoid standing or sleeping near windows.

Now **everyone** was on edge & on the lookout for strange sounds and feeling unwell.

& What happened – more & more people started hearing strange sounds and feeling unwell.

THIS LATER SPREAD AROUND THE WORLD Through Mass Suggestion. **(SLIDE 32)**

In 2018, the U.S. State Department issued a **warning** to **all OF THEIR** foreign diplomats to be on the lookout for **strange** sounds and feeling unwell. Before long – Embassy staff in over a dozen countries were reporting having been attacked.

In taking these actions, the American government created a **global** experiment in mass suggestion.

Then in September 2021, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin sent an alert to 2.9 million U.S. military personnel and contractors, asking them to report any unusual health incidents – especially accompanied by strange sounds.

Before long – there were over 1500 – reported ‘attacks.’

The problem is – the symptoms of Havana Syndrome **are SO vague – as to be reported by nearly anyone who has ever lived – in any given week of their life.**

(SLIDE 33)

headache
nausea
difficulty concentrating
forgetfulness
dizziness
disorientation
confusion
tinnitus
vision problems
trouble sleeping
fatigue
balance problems
head pressure
ear pain
difficulty focusing eyes
depression
nose bleeds

& The 3 **MOST SERIOUS** symptoms were **NEVER** demonstrated

hearing loss
brain damage
white matter tract changes – **(we’ll get to that later)**

There was a 2014 New Zealand study by Keith Petrie at Auckland Uni.

(SLIDE 34-35)

where he asked 1,000 people – over the previous week, what symptoms they'd experienced.

The average person reported 5!

35% said they had headaches – in the last week.

The same number reported fatigue

nearly 30% had trouble sleeping

15% - difficulty concentrating

14% - - depression

13% - memory problems

8% reported Nausea

Another 8% -- Dizziness

These are **ALL** key symptoms of Havana Syndrome.

People have these symptoms **ALL** the time.

A 2018 *Journal of the American Medical Association* study claimed to find brain damage (SLIDE 36)

- Used a threshold for impairment at 40% (meaning 4 in 10 people would have been classified as impaired!). It was ridiculous. It should have been 5%.

(we received leaked emails) that showed 3 researchers whose names were on the JAMA study – removed their names AT THE LAST MINUTE – because they were refused access to the data.

When the JAMA editors received the study – they sent it to UCLA Neurologist Bob Baloh because of the claims of inner ear damage.

Bob is a leading authority on the vestibular system – which deals with the inner ear, balance & spatial awareness.

He has written the standard textbook in the field & created SEVERAL of the tests used to assess Havana Syndrome patients.

(SLIDE 37)

Bob took one look at the study & rejected it. He said it read like science fiction.

& they published it anyway.

That's when Bob contacted me - & we wrote our book **(SLIDE 38)**

Bob – said that over his career he's reviewed a thousand articles for peer-reviewed journals & in every time you were given the other reviewer comments – with ONE exception – the Havana Syndrome submission.

We think the JAMA editors saw this study as a nice publicity opportunity & to counter the obvious FLAWS they published 2 critiques along side of it – urging caution.

The problem is – the media reports claiming brain damage – paid little attention to the critical commentaries.

So the headline was – JAMA study finds brain damage – when that wasn't the case.

When the study appeared – the entire editorial board of the respected journal CORTEX – called for it to be retracted.

Their editor – **(SLIDE 39)** Neurologist Sergio Della Sala said the only mystery about Havana Syndrome was how such a bad article ever got published.

Then in 2019, JAMA published a 2nd Study (SLIDE 40)

- Found minor obvious anomalies that were consistent with people exposed to prolonged stress
- 12 of those affected had pre-existing histories of concussion, compared to none in the healthy controls. This alone could explain the differences in the 2 groups.

Then there was the FUMIGATION STUDY that suggested pesticide exposure (SLIDE 41)

Their findings were very VERY vague.

Bottom-line: There is no neurotoxin in the world that only affects American & Canadian diplomats & their families.

It also can't explain the spread around the world. It's NOT neurotoxins.

Then in December 2020 a National Academy of Sciences study concluded the most likely explanation was pulsed microwave radiation. **(SLIDE 42)**

This was a sad chapter in the history of science

Normally you think - National Academy of Sciences – it must be objective & free of politics. Not under the Trump Admin.

They said they couldn't evaluate the social contagion explanation as there was no evidence on the early spread.

We detailed this in our book that came out HALF a year earlier – THE NAS cited our earlier studies (7 times) but they acted as if they were unaware of our book.

Pulitzer Prize journalist Tim Golden went to Cuba – interviewed 3 dozen people and described the EARLY spread in great detail – from 'patient zero' onward – MORE than a year before the NAS report. THEY IGNORED THE EXISTENCE of his study as well.

THE National Academy's panel interviewed believers – they failed to interview ANY of the major skeptics. NOT A SINGLE ONE

There were NO specialists on microwaves or MPI -

Prof. Simon Wessely is an expert on psychogenic illness & was originally on the panel.

Simon told me that he then gave a radio interview in which he suggested psychogenic illness as a possibility – after which they kicked him off the panel!

The panel suggested it could be the MICROWAVE FREY EFFECT where - as microwaves strike the head they create a barely discernible perception of clicking – NONE of the victims reported hearing a barely discernible clicking noise.

It's NOT actually a sound – it stimulates the inner ear – but the brain thinks it's a sound.

Furthermore - Microwaves would shut down WI-FI – shut down computers - it would literally heat you brain –

& for all those people who heard a strange sound during their attack - & were asked to record it – the sound wasn't microwaves because YOU cannot make an audio recording of a microwave.

BUT YOU CAN MAKE AN AUDIO RECORDING of a CRICKET.

SLIDE RABBIT HOLE 43

For 6 years the U.S. Government went down a **rabbit** hole – searching for secret weapons and foreign conspiracies –

For 6 years much of the mainstream media went down that same hole looking for clicks and views

and when they reached the **bottom** of the hole – **all** they found were **rabbits**. Because in the end, prosaic explanations were determined to be the cause of the events in Cuba and **later** – around the world.

& That is the lesson of Havana Syndrome: **follow** the mainstream science.

UNICORN SLIDE 44

This episode can be summarized in ONE sentence –

‘When you hear the sounds of hoofbeats in the night – first think horses, not zebras.’

The Drs at the State Dep. Went for the most exotic hypothesis early on. They went searching for unicorns when they should have stuck to mundane explanations.

This story a cautionary tale of what happens when politics gets mixed with science –

The Trump Admin. Played a big part in it because they didn’t want to admit they had made a mistake.

In New Zealand we should not be overly complacent & think that something similar couldn’t happen here -- because we have our own issues with politics corrupting science.

Let me give you 1 example - I have just written a book on the SCIENCE OF THE MAORI LUNAR CALENDAR

There are all sorts of misleading claims online promoted by the Education Ministry – the Health Ministry – & the mainstream media – pseudoscientific claims about the Calendar – WHY? Because people are afraid to criticise it because it’s indigenous knowledge & seen as disrespectful – This has led to a widespread belief in NZ that that phases of the moon can affect human behaviour.
AS A RESULT

- There are schools in NZ where teachers refuse to give assessments during ‘high energy’ phases as they believe students will be too unfocused to sit the EXAM

- There's a widespread belief that suicide rates spike during certain lunar phases – OR crime or weather patterns, or planting vegetables during certain phases will result in better germination & crop yields – or that menstrual cycles synch with phases of the moon.

NONE of these claims have been called out in the media – in fact they have been promoted in the media.

It's easy to criticise what's going on in the United States with Havana Syndrome – (& the mixing of politics & science) but we should not ignore what's going on in our own backyard.

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Earlier this year **60 Minutes America** caused a sensation when they broadcast a report suggesting that there is a secret energy weapon & it's being used by the Russians.

I have written a series of articles in THE SKEPTIC thoroughly debunking these claims.

After the program aired The CIA director said each of the claims had been investigated and found to be BASELESS.

I don't have time to go into the details but what I can say for certain is that 60 Minutes America were guilty of journalistic malpractice – they only gave one side of the story & left out all skeptics.

ON A POSITIVE NOTE – 60 Minutes Australia wasn't totally happy with that report & they had me on for about 5 minutes giving the OTHER SIDE.

Let me give you 1 ex. Of how bad the 60 Minutes America report was:

A US diplomat stationed in China claimed he & his family had been targeted with an energy weapon. He came home & they were in a hotel in Philadelphia & one night she saw 1 of his children thrashing around in bed – reached down to pick them up – and heard a wooshing sound like water running – THEY MADE IT sound like he had been hit with a microwave weapon & left out the most obvious cause – TINNITUS. It's very common for tinnitus sufferers to think water is running – the problem was – 60 Minutes failed to give this possible explanation.

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There is a long history of people believing that sounds could make them sick

1760s B. Franklin developed Glass Armonica **SLIDE 47**

Spools of glass that rotated using a foot pedal (like old Singer Sewing Machines)

Wet fingers placed on the glass produced a high-pitched sound

---At concerts there were Numerous reports of audience members being cured various ailments

THEN – After 2 famous players (out of hundreds) – fell sick – a rumor started that listening to the armonica made people sick. Suddenly – People were going to concerts and fainting and feeling unwell.

SLIDE 48

Over the past 2 centuries – around the world – people have claimed to hear humming sounds that have been blamed on an array of health problems –

Taos N Mexico Hum

Kokomo Hum - Indiana

Bristol Hum – UK

SLIDE 49

North Shore Hum in NZ

Different studies have implicated normal background sounds

the role of tinnitus

& in 1 case SINGING TOADFISH off Calif.

The media appears to play a big role in driving these scares – which prompt people to over-scrutinize their environment & their bodies - & redefine pre-existing health complaints under a new label.

SLIDE 50

The Health Psychology Department at Auckland Uni. has studied health complaints attributed to Wind Turbines

They have demonstrated that the effects can be explained by mass psychology, expectation and framing, not from the noise of the blades. A panel of scientists found that a small fraction of persons living near turbines experienced health issues related to stress from the perception of noise, but not from the sound waves themselves. There is no evidence that sound below the threshold of human hearing has a negative effect on human health. In fact, human respiration and heart rate generate higher levels of sub-audible sound than those produced by rotating wind turbine blades, and many everyday sounds occur at a higher level.

SLIDE 51 (Giraffes)

A few years ago it was discovered that giraffes communicate at night through **vibrations** from their antlers – they create a sound that is below the threshold of human hearing. It is believed to be a means of reassuring their comrades in the dark that they are nearby.

After media reports of this discovery – More than 100 residents living near the Bristol Zoo in the UK claimed to hear mysterious humming sounds they were certain were from the giraffes & making them unwell. An investigation turned up nothing.

In the original study, scientists recorded the animals for over 900 hours and were only able to identify sixty-five incidents lasting just a few seconds.

I have a new book just out where I look at similar cases to Havana Syndrome involving Phantom Attackers.

What you find is the same pattern repeating itself.

Here is an example from New Zealand – The Raglan Cat Killer. **SLIDE 52**

Starting in 2013 residents in Raglan on the West coast of the North Island – were convinced there was a serial cat killer on the loose. After some cats went missing – **The Waikato Times** picked up the story.

All social panics are grounded in fear, and this was no different. The backdrop to the Panic was Gareth Morgan who in 2013 called for the **eradication** of cats as they **threatened** native bird species.

Before long **rumors** began to circulate IN RAGLAN that a local **bird** lover may have been **inspired** by Morgan and taken it upon themselves **to cull** the cat population. As a result, cat owners began paying closer attention to felines going missing in their neighborhood.

But pets **die** and **disappear ALL** the time. Get **hit** by cars, accidentally **poisoned**, **killed** by dogs & die naturally. Cats also have a **well-known** habit of exchanging owners as they see fit.

Ordinarily people don't pay much attention – **unless** it's our own CAT. But occasionally something happens to draw our focus to missing pets in a certain area & before long rumors circulate that there is a **pet** killer on the loose and **every** dead or missing pet is suspected of having met a nefarious end. These scares reflect prevailing fears.

The starting point for a serial **pet killer panic** is usually a cluster of apparently mysterious animal deaths that are reported in the media, and an expert – often a veterinarian – speculates that a killer is **preying** on our pets. Police investigate & fail to identify the killer – because there **is** none!

Frustrated with perceived police inaction, **concerned** residents soon take it upon themselves to investigate cases and share them with news outlets & on social media. Media outlets produce stories with photos of victims, **tearful** interviews with owners, and maps of the killer's 'territory.' The **perp** is often given a nickname & there is speculation on his motives, how he works and whether he will move on to killing people if he is not caught. Campaigns to catch the culprit are launched and reward money may be offered. Publicity **surrounding** these events leads to more reports of dead & missing pets. Eventually the scare peaks and fades amid increasing police and media skepticism and a lack of evidence.

Remember human perception is very fallible

SLIDE 54

In Havana the initial rumors were that it was a sonic attack and diplomats were the target. The Americans began to scrutinize the sounds of crickets. Suddenly, any unusual sound was reason to suspect they were being targeted or anytime they began to feel unwell, they would listen for possible sounds from a nearby weapon. **The fallible sense here is ear-witness testimony – which is more unreliable than eyewitness testimony.**

It's similar with UFO waves

SLIDE 55

which are typically triggered by an initial sensational case that prompts media attention. People then began to scrutinise the skies for evidence of the claim – & they start redefining

ambiguous aerial stimuli – stars and planets, airplanes, etc. as ET spacecraft. **The fallible sense here is eyewitness testimony. LAKE MONSTER WAVES SIMILAR**

SLIDE 56

ANOTHER RECENT SOCIAL PANIC is needle-spiking

In the Fall of 2021 – reports of young girls being spiked by hypodermic needles while out clubbing with friends – swept across the UK.

There were thousands of police reports.

No one was kidnapped.

Not one sexual assault report.

Not one robbery.

Not a single conviction.

Even though these alleged attacks took place at nightclubs with CCTV cameras & people all around.

This was a social panic – an exaggerated fear of a perceived threat – stoked by the media, advocacy groups, law enforcement, and politicians.

NOW - Anyone who believes they were drugged during a night out, should be taken **seriously**, and their claims **thoroughly** investigated.

These are **NOT** cases of drink spiking but needle-spiking.

We do know from the studies that DRINK spiking by a stranger is Exceedingly rare – like what happened at the Hamilton bar.

Drink-spiking by friends is COMMON - & it's not someone slipping a drug into your drink – it's the girl who asks her friend to get her another drink & they give her a double – or ask for it mixed.

Confirmed cases of NEEDLE-SPIKING are virtually unheard of because it's so difficult to do – in a public place.

Like most PHANTOM ASSAILANT CASES it started with an initial sensational media report

a 19-year-old Nottingham University student named Sarah Buckle.

Went clubbing with friends

Drank too much – passed out

Noticed a bruise on her hand with a tiny blemish resembling a pinprick.

Despite the vagueness of the story – & never getting tested – it received headlines

‘I was needle-spiked’

Curiously – there were 100s and 100s of nearly identical reports of young women being spiked by hypodermic needles in American before world war I – amid rumors that gangs were **drugging** girls and forcing them to live a life of prostitution. It coincided with the **white** slavery scare.

So here’s the pattern –

The typical UK syringe-spiking victim was a **young** woman out clubbing with friends who would become **lightheaded** after consuming a modest amount of alcohol. She would feel faint or pass out and be taken home or to a hospital.

The next day, she has trouble recalling the events of the previous night.

Then after hearing suggestions that she may have been **SPIKED**, she would scrutinize her body for evidence of an attack, only to find vague signs that confirm her suspicions:

57 – 58 - 59

- a scratch, bruise, bump, or blemish that is assumed to have been an injection site.
- This is reminiscent of the vague criteria once used to accuse people suspected of **BEWITCHMENT** during the Salem witch-hunts when skin lesions were taken as confirming evidence that someone had been consorting with the devil.
- **Social** media postings of suspected spikings – appear to have played a **major** part in the spread. These soon gave rise to dramatic news reports of a few high-profile cases and calls for more victims to come forward, prompting a **deluge** of social media posts, the creation of Facebook groups and online petitions calling for **greater** security for woman.
- As more and more ‘victims’ shared their experiences including photos of suspected puncture marks, there was a public outcry for police to do more, generating even more media reports.
- In **most** instances, the ‘prick mark’ was barely discernible and could have prosaic explanations such as an insect bite or blemish. During the scare, this pattern was repeated again and again.

Rarely would victims go to the hospital & get tested. & when they did they had no drug associated with date rape – except alcohol.

UK National Police Chiefs' Council announced the results of 800 urine samples taken from people in suspected drink and needle-spiking cases.

Small # had GHB which could be used as a sedative in sexual offences, but it is also used as a recreational drug under such names 'liquid ecstasy.'

GHB is thick – flows like molasses – would require a large, thick needle – be painful & require a **prolonged** injection time.

A similar pattern happened in Iran

SLIDE 60

In late November 2022 students attending colleges in the Iranian cities of Arak, Karaj, Isfahan, and Tehran reported becoming ill after eating canteen food. Their symptoms included headache, fever, vomiting and diarrhoea, and was consistent with food poisoning. During these outbreaks, rumors spread through the four colleges that the ' poisonings ' may have been deliberate acts intended to prevent students from participating in ongoing anti-government protests.ⁱ A few days later on November 30th several students at the Noor Yazdanshahr Conservatory in Qom City fell ill, fueling rumors that it was a deliberate attack. One prominent story making the rounds held that the students were the victims of ultra conservatives who wanted to stop women from attending school. A second rumor posited that the ' poisonings ' were perpetrated by the government as punishment for the girls' participation in recent protests against a crackdown on women refusing to wear their hijabs or headscarves in public.ⁱⁱ The incident in Qom was later determined to have been triggered by a stink bomb which likely induced a nocebo effect – the opposite of the placebo effect, where negative expectations lead people to experience symptoms through suggestion alone. In other words, if you are given an inert sugar pill and told that it is likely to cause an array of side effects, many people will experience the anticipated effects.

SLIDE 61

When the incident at the Qom school was reported as a possible revenge poisoning in an Iranian media outlet, girls across the country became hyperaware of an array of mundane odors believing that they too may be targeted with poison gas. This helps to explain the sudden explosion of cases in over 120 schools in widely separated parts of the country.

In a small number of these schools there was suspicion that stink bombs were also set off. Education Ministry officials said they believed that these ' bombs ' may have been a form of protest by student activists.

A second suspicion was that opposition groups had encouraged the use of the 'bombs' to make it appear as if the government was poisoning girls, to gain sympathy for their movement and destabilize the regime.ⁱⁱⁱ

QUESTIONS

ⁱ. Sinaee, M. (December 3, 2022). Hundreds of food poisonings In Iran's universities raise alarm. *Iran International*.

ⁱⁱ. Iran investigating suspected poisonings of hundreds of schoolgirls. (February 28, 2023). *PBS News Hour*; Parent, D. (February 27, 2023). Iranian officials to investigate 'revenge' poisoning of schoolgirls. *The Guardian*.

ⁱⁱⁱ. No signs of toxic substances discovered in schools: Intelligence ministry. (April 29, 2023). *Tehran Times*.