

## Medical Mystery: The Importance of Patient History

My 29-year old daughter recently visited me following a ten-day sojourn to [Kyrgyzstan](#). A PhD candidate in psychology at UMass-Boston, she had been invited to this central Asian republic to present a paper at an international conference. She found the people to be warm and friendly, but realized the country was a study in contrasts. Bleak Soviet-style buildings defined the cities, while yurts (large, round tents) filled with spectacular color dotted the countryside. A center for Silk Road spices, the cuisine was nonetheless bland, relying on meat and raw milk products reflective of a nomadic heritage. *Kymyz*, a slightly alcoholic drink made from fermented mare's milk, is the national drink, available fresh in late spring and summer and bottled for year-round consumption.

We had planned an extended weekend of fun-filled activities, but she woke up the first morning with very sharp and persistent pain in her left eye. She didn't remember injuring herself, and her eye wasn't swollen or puffy. Strong light made her teary. The entire white of her eye (the sclera) was bright red. It was as if someone had taken a red magic-marker and colored in the entire white space around her iris. Successive doses of extra-strength Tylenol had no impact on the pain which persisted throughout the day and into a very sleepless night.

The next morning, Saturday, we parked ourselves in the ER at Wills Eye Hospital. The young ER doctor diagnosed her condition as "acute diffuse scleritis" — extreme inflammation of the sclera — and prescribed 800 mg of ibuprofen every six hours to reduce the inflammation and hence the pain. The condition would have to resolve itself on its own. Relatively rare, we learned that scleritis favors women over men, especially women in their late twenties to early forties. The concern,

however, was that, in the majority (60%) of cases, scleritis is a sign of an underlying auto-immune disorder, usually lupus or rheumatoid arthritis. It was strongly recommended that my daughter consult a specialist as soon as she returned home for testing to identify and treat the underlying cause.

We were in shock. Lupus? Rheumatoid arthritis? Was this really possible? There was no history of these ailments in our family, and my seemingly healthy daughter, a marathon runner, was preparing for her next race. A shadow descended on our fun-filled weekend. As a super-concerned mother, my worry level kicked into overdrive.

Back in Boston, my daughter arrived for her appointment at Massachusetts Eye and Ear. She dutifully filled out a multi-page questionnaire that asked extensive questions about her health, her occupation, recent travel, consumption of unusual foods, and any other symptoms she was experiencing. A kindly, white-haired ophthalmologist examined her eye and listened to her tale of pain and a spoiled weekend. Yes, he confirmed, in most instances diffuse scleritis is a sign of a serious underlying auto-immune disease. Extensive blood work would need to be done to determine the cause.

As he continued his explanations, the doctor scanned her paperwork and glanced at the checkmarks in her personal history. Suddenly, he stopped. The personal history indicated that she had recently traveled to Kyrgyzstan and consumed raw milk products. The doctor questioned her about her trip. "They drink a lot of raw milk in Kyrgystan," she explained, "and much of their cuisine is based around it."

"Well, you have absolutely no rashes, back or joint pain, and you have enough energy

to be a PhD student and exercise several times a week," replied the doctor, "so I'd say chances are slim to none that you have an autoimmune disorder." He recommended that she not waste her time getting blood tests.

She would be perfectly fine within a day or two, he assured her, but she should stay away from raw milk in the future. Bacteria in unpasteurized (raw) milk are known to cause scleritis, especially if ingested in large and consistent amounts.

What a relief! Thank heaven for personal histories, I thought, and for kindly doctors who take the time to read them. This experience made me realize how important it is for patients to fully answer all the seemingly pointless questions on medical history forms and for clinicians to ensure that they review them thoroughly.

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