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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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# Letters

Dear John

Geoff Stansfield's paper in the Journal of Biological Curation 1 (1) only emphasised the lack of established facts about pest control methods and their effectiveness. Despite the substantial amount of literature on the subject are we any nearer reaching a consensus of what the most appropriate methods really are? It seems to me that the most favoured methods are generally passed on by word of mouth.

One such technique that has been recommended to me on several occasions, by separate and independent curators is the mythical 'overnight fumigation' of entomological cabinet drawers using dichlorvos. Precisely because it has always been related to me by word of mouth I am unsure of the origin of this technique, or for what it has been successfully used (e.g. Anthrenus or all insect pests; larvae or adults etc).

The method can be summarised as follows: the moment insect pests are discovered in a drawer isolate the drawer, drop in a small cube of Vapona and leave it overnight. The following day, remove Vapona together with the corpses of the unsuspecting beetles, confident in the knowledge that another infestation has been dealt with effectively. It sounds too good to be true - and, of course, it is.

A freeze dried adder on display at Sunderland Museum was the victim of a Ptinus tectus attack last year. The adder was removed from display and placed, together with a 2x1x1 cm block of Vapona, in a cellophane envelope and sealed inside a plastic container. This volume of Vapona should have been adequate to kill the pests according to the manufacturers instructions and was certainly as large as blocks allegedly used in entomological cabinet drawers.

I inspected the larvae the following day to make sure that they had done the honest thing and curled up and died - as you have probably guessed they had not. Nor had they the next day, nor the next, nor the next. They, in fact, continued munching and metamorphosing for the next five weeks before the three adults that emerged finally curled up their tarsi.

I know that I am not the only natural history curator to have been advised to use the 'overnight method'. My experience proves that for Ptinus tectus it does not work. It is a cautionary tale not to believe everything that is passed down the grapevine.

On a similar subject, we have recently had a collection of birds and mammals fumigated by Rentokil using their 'bubble', or, portable chamber. Following consultation with our specialist conservators and with Rentokil's own specialists we decided against using methyl bromide, due to the risks to collections and staff associated with this gas; in particular its rumoured absorption into fatty tissues etc.

The gas we used instead was phosphine. This was recommended on the grounds of safety and efficacy by Rentokil. The only disadvantage is the longer exposure time required - ten to fourteen days in the 'bubble'.

It is too early for us to comment on the results of our own experiences. So far, no insect pests have been found in the fumigated material. On the other hand the potential infestation was identified at a very early stage and few individual beetles were found (Ptinus tectus again - but in Newcastle this time!).

In my ignorance I had thought that phosphine fumigation had gone out with the Ark. If it is as good as it is claimed to be then why have we been agonizing over the pros and cons of methyl bromide for so many years?

I would be delighted to hear from anyone else who has had experience of using phosphine as a fumigant, both to find out their experiences and to establish how common its use is in museums.

Yours sincerely,

Alec Coles  
Senior Museums Officer (Natural Sciences),  
Tyne and Wear Museums Service

## NEW DIRECTOR FOR THE MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION

Mark Taylor was appointed MA Director in November 1989. He is an historian by education (degree from Birmingham University) and was in hotel management before joining the Association five years ago; his previous posts were Conference Manager and Director of Museum Enterprises (the Association's trading company).

One of his first public acts as director must have been to orchestrate the vociferous condemnation from the MA to the recommendation of the Parliamentary all-party Education, Science and Arts Select Committee that all major publicly-funded museums and galleries should urgently consider levying compulsory admission charges. BCG shares this view ('totally misconceived' to quote from the MA press release) and supports the Association in its stance.