

ALLERGY

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

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I very much liked the “Window of Opportunity” in the Nestle Nutrition Workshop Series 61, published by Karger in 2008. Page 180 has an interesting account of the hygiene hypothesis:

Dr. Bier: ... The other is the issue of the hygiene hypothesis, the cleaner environment. We are just in a somewhat less dirty environment, we are not in a clean environment, and that is the problem I have with that particular approach.

So, I am not alone

Dr. Barker:... I am guilty of inventing the term “hygiene hypothesis” as an explanation of the epidemic of appendicitis that followed the introduction of running hot water into housing of Western countries.

According to [Sozan ska et al.](#) the hygiene hypothesis has more fathers

In 1970, Peter Preston¹ posed the following question: “Is the atopic syndrome a consequence of good hygiene?” If this was the case, he argued that “the manifestations of atopy . would have appeared in given areas only after standards of hygiene . had been raised to high levels.”

while [David Strachan](#) calls it a misnomer since I know him. The last occasion was in the BMJ in August 2014

As the authors correctly point out, the term “hygiene hypothesis”, which is often attributed to my BMJ 1989 paper, is actually shorthand for a line of argument established much earlier. When presenting my own work, I regularly remind my audience that the ideas presented in the BMJ 1989 paper were inspired by David Barker’s publications on acute appendicitis a year or two before. However, as the authors acknowledge, Barker’s “hygiene hypothesis for appendicitis” was in turn influenced by earlier thinking.

I also recount that the inclusion of “hygiene” in the title of my paper (along with “hay fever” and “household size”) owed more to an alliterative tendency than to my aspiration to claim a new scientific paradigm. What interested me over the subsequent years was how, after initial disdain on grounds of implausibility, the immunological community enthusiastically endorsed the concept of the “hygiene hypothesis” as soon as they had proposed a cellular mechanism to explain it!

[...]

Indeed, the frustration over 25 years of epidemiological and immunological investigation is that so little progress has been made in identifying the biologically relevant exposures which “explain” the frequently replicated epidemiological observations linking allergic sensitisation and atopic disease (inversely) to family size and to “unhygienic” environments such as farming, separately and in combination...