Occupational hazard of rubber tapping

An occupational hazard to rubber tappers in the forests of Sumatra, Indonesia, is the risk of being attacked by a tiger. Collecting rubber is done by making a small cut in the bark of a tree, then fixing a small metal ‘gutter and cup’ right under the cut. Latex trickling down into the cups is collected later and dried in the sun to form large rubber ‘slabs’. While at work one morning, two young men were attacked by a tiger when ‘tapping’ rubber in a forest far away from the hospital I was in charge of at the time (1959).

On arrival, one casualty was semi-comatose. The tiger had hit him on the right side of his head; this had caused a temporal bone fracture, displaced inwards, with torn skin pulled down over the ear. Liquor and blood were oozing from the wound.

His colleague told us how it had happened: his friend had squatted next to a tree to relieve himself when a tiger, coming from behind this, had struck him. He himself had jumped to his friend’s aid and had hit the tiger with his heavy golok (chopper). The tiger had then turned on him pawing his right shoulder, pulling down skin and muscle, inflicting a gaping wound. His loud screaming and shouting had caused the tiger to flee when other rubber tappers nearby came to their aid. Hidden in this simple account is the courage of this young rubber tapper to attack a tiger, thereby saving his friend’s life! It took the men 2 days to reach our hospital, transporting two casualties first by boat, then carrying them along the road.

Surgical intervention to the first man consisted of cleaning the wound under local anaesthesia, lifting the temporal bone fragment up to re-align it, suturing the galea aponeurotica, excising suspected non-viable tissue and closing the wound, with a soft drain in place. Anti-tetanus serum was administered and aureomycin intravenously for some days. Once in the ward, the man soon regained full consciousness.

The other young man I treated by cleaning the wound, instilling antibiotic fluid, suturing muscle, fascia and skin, administering anti-tetanus serum and then antibiotics for a few days. Nursing care made him recover within a week, able to go home. His more seriously injured mate took much longer.

When eventually friends came to collect him to return home, he walked away from us with a bright smile on his face and much waving of the hand, saying ‘Terima kasih banyak’ (‘I thank you very much’) a dozen times! No doubt both men will much later have enjoyed telling a tall tale to family and friends!

J.T. Mets

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