

An Unusual Case

Robert A. Norman, DO, Tampa, Florida

A 32-year-old Hispanic woman and her parents came to see me. She asked about having a growth removed from her lip. "It doesn't really bother me. I mean, it doesn't hurt," she said. "I just really don't want it there anymore."

"How long have you had it?" I asked.

"Ten years," she said.

I asked about her history. The patient was mildly mentally retarded. About 8 years ago, she and her family had moved from a tough area in New York City to Tampa, Florida. She told me that 10 years ago, some rowdy neighborhood kids had thrown rocks at her. "I think one of them hit my lip," she said, pointing to the raised bump.

After wondering about it, I asked why she wanted the growth removed now, after all of this time.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm just tired of looking at it."

I gloved up and palpated the raised red bump on her left upper lip, which appeared as an irregular hematoma.

"If you're ready, I'm ready," I said.

She nodded in affirmation, and her parents seemed to agree. After reviewing the procedure, I had the patient sign a consent form. Her mother appeared quite anxious. I talked to the parents and told them they could stay in the room, but they opted to leave prior to the procedure. I told them I would ask them back in when I was finished.

The patient appeared more than ready. After cleaning the area, I numbed it. "That's the worst of it," I told her. "Now let's find out what's going on in here."

Using a scalpel, I opened the lesion and then explored it with dissecting scissors. I probed and, within a short time, found a solid object that resembled a small hematoma.

She seemed to handle everything without much distress. "You're doing great," I said.

I used a pickup to grasp the object and was ready to put it into the biopsy bottle when I noticed something shiny. As my nurse put pressure on the wound, I squeezed the object with my fingertips. The bloody covering slipped off and revealed a copper ball. When



FIGURE 1. A postoperative photograph of the patient after being given the surprise diagnosis.

I dropped it into the bottle, it landed with a little plop and sank.

"It's out," I said. Getting my needle on the driver, I prepared to sew up the wound.

"What's out?" the patient asked. "What did you find?"

"I don't think you got hit by just a rock 10 years ago," I said. "You were shot by a BB gun."

"A BB?" she asked. "Oh my God! Momma, Papa, come in here!"

"I can finish this," I told my nurse. "Why don't you bring them back in?"

I looped the sutures through the skin and clipped each one. I was finished with 3 stitches (Figure 1).

The parents returned, and I showed them the shiny little ball in the bottle. The mother was somewhat hysterical when she heard the news. "My God," she said. "I don't believe it. All these years. A BB!"

"That's a first for me," I said. I had removed splinters and other objects during my share of emergency department and walk-in clinic shifts. But, removals were usually right after the injuries, and you were expected to find something. When an object comes out 10 years later, it's quite a surprise.

After all this time, the mystery has been solved.