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CORRESPONDENCE

Mass poisoning

SIR—Slack *et al.* (*Nature* **345**, 583; 1990), writing about mass-poisoning between May 1981 and March 1983 in the Madrid area of Spain, apparently involving aniline-degraded, reprocessed rapeseed oil as the causative agent, state that the events, reported to be lethal to 340 of more than 20,000 affected individuals, “probably represent the worst recorded outbreak of food-borne chemical intoxication ever documented.” However, an event in the winter of 1971–72 in Iraq, involving a methylmercury fungicide present on wheat used for bread baking, was reported lethal to some 459 individuals^{1,2}. Some 6,500 people were reported to have been hospitalized among a much larger number intoxicated.

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1. Bakir, F., *et al.* *Science* **181**, 230–41 (1973).
2. Marsh, D.O. in *The Toxicity of Methyl Mercury* (C. U. Eccles and Z. Annau, editors). Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins Series in Environmental Toxicology, pp.45–53, 1987.