

Microscopy AND Microanalysis

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Dear Abbe

Dear Abbe,

Lately I've been having trouble with contamination of my cultures. I know you are not necessarily a biologist, but I'm hoping you have heard of colleagues with this vexing problem.

Aseptic in Aspen

Dear Aseptic,

Quit your whining! We've all had problems with contamination at one time or another. I don't remember any of my colleagues actually recounting an episode of a ruined culture, unless you count the time we all went to see Jonas Salk's first attempt at the Cabaret. Then, of course, there was a colleague in Munich who developed a "transfer hood," as he called it. He took several air-conditioner filters and glued them together, then he put a powerful fan behind it so it blew constantly toward him while he made his transfers. We used to call him "Blähend" for obvious reasons. Another friend, Ralph Emerson from Berkeley, used an unusual method of sterilization. He would flame his loop until red hot, then lick his fingers and use them to wipe the loop off before transferring the culture. Seemed to work fine, except when Ralph began to swipe at the air for no reason. Try that for a while and write again when you stop seeing things.

Dear Abbe,

We are having trouble with users of our multiuser facility putting things back where they belong, replacing lids in the hood, cleaning up, etc. . . . Signs, lectures—nothing seems to help. It's becoming a safety and hazardous material nightmare around here. How can we instill the concepts of general lab protocol and safety with these people?

Contaminated in Cleveland

Dear Condy,

Unfortunately, I have found that laboratory laziness and slovenly behavior is deeply ingrained and difficult to deprogram. We tried the Lab Bat for this particular problem with limited success. Then we employed an Officer for Continuous Improvement who implemented "systems" for lab safety. Examples included painted lines around dangerous areas and hand-sized guillotines in restricted lab space. Even this was ignored. Our biggest advances were realized when we hired the Sisters of Sacred Compliance. Their ruthless use of wooden rulers had an amazing impact, which included a change in "culture" and in some belief systems. Our staff and faculty began to buy into the new culture of compliance and lab responsibility. Contact Sister Mary at the SSC and tell her I sent you.

Asking Herr Abbe your burning questions is more fun than unleashing your pet lab rat in a jar of tarantulas! Please don't hesitate to unleash your questions at jshields@cb.uga.edu.

