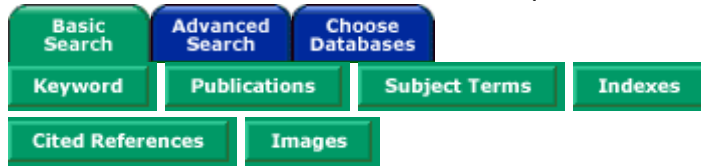



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CHOLERA ON THE ROCKS

1867 marked Livingstone's continuing attempt to trace the source of the Nile, publication of the first volume of Karl Marx' *Das Kapital*, the birth of Marie Curie in Warsaw, and the last report of **cholera** in Peru until January, 1991. The reappearance of epidemic **cholera** in South America was explosive: by the summer of 1992 over 533 000 cases and 4700 deaths had been documented in nineteen countries in that hemisphere. The organism was typed as *Vibrio cholerae* 01, biotype El Tor, serotype Inaba. Investigators from the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, USA, working with Peruvian researchers in a study in Trujillo, noted that the municipal water supply was unchlorinated and found that drinking unboiled water accounted for most cases of **cholera** in that city.(n1)

These results have now been confirmed by another collaborative venture between CDC and Peruvian investigators in the city of Piura in the north of the country, where an unsuspected source of infection was also identified--ice. Exploring the links between drinking beverages from street vendors and infection, Ries and colleagues(n2) discovered that the vendors made the beverages by boiling grain in water, cooling it, and adding sugar and usually ice. The ice, they were told, was purchased from local ice factories. A stomach-churning inspection of two such factories provided the answer. The ice was made from municipal water that received no further treatment at the plant. Ries et al doubtless thought they had seen enough when they prised open ice casings being submerged in large tanks full of discoloured water complete with particulate matter. The ice, of course, was not meant for human consumption; according to factory managers, it was merely intended for keeping fish and seafood fresh.

(n1.) Swerdlow DL, Mintz ED, Rodriguez M, et al. Waterborne transmission of epidemic **cholera** in Trujillo, Peru: lessons for a continent at risk. *Lancet* 1992; 340: 28-33.

(n2.) Ries AA, Vugia DJ, Beingolea L, et al. **Cholera** in Piura, Peru: a modern urban epidemic. *J Infect Dis* 1992; 166: 1429-33.

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By Imogen Evans

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