

Puzzling Symptoms

The man who grew two breasts

Dr. Jim (no patient's real name is used in this book) was the subject of a report I published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1980 about a patient of mine who, late in life, developed breasts. Berton Roueche', author of *Eleven Blue Men* and numerous medical detective stories published over several decades in the *New Yorker*, was a childhood hero of mine, and it was a special day when he came to interview me about the case of Dr. Jim. He later featured the case in his 1995 collection, *The Man Who Grew Two Breasts*; Berton Roueche' (New York, NY: Truman Palley Books/Dutton, 1995).

Dr. Jim was seventy-six years old when he first came to see me. He practiced medicine in a small town nearby the city where I worked. Dr. Jim had developed swelling in his right breast. The breast was removed and revealed "gynecomastia," which means the breast was being stimulated by estrogens. A few months later, the left breast began to swell, and he referred himself to me to investigate why he was growing breasts and why it was happening at this point in his life.

Gynecomastia in any male past the teen years is an ominous sign. It usually means the body is making estrogens, and it usually means the estrogens are coming from a tumor of the adrenal gland or from a tumor of the testicle. In both cases the tumors are most often highly malignant. In very rare instances, lung and other cancers can stimulate the production of estrogens from the testicles.

I set out to find out the source of Dr. Jim's estrogens. Repeated measurements showed no measurable or elevated levels of estrogens in his blood or urine. Imaging studies showed no tumors of his adrenals or testicles. There are rare cases of other tumors causing high estrogens by stimulating the testicles to secrete estrogens. Other imaging studies failed to find any such tumors. His pituitary gland was also normal in the imaging studies.

In other words, I struck out in trying to find the source of Dr. Jim's estrogens. I even repeated the studies and again nothing showed up.

I questioned Dr. Jim whether his wife might be taking estrogens, only to find that she was not, and, in fact, had never taken estrogens. So that was a blind end also. I then recalled reading an old case report that involved certain vitamin pills being contaminated with estrogens in the manufacturing process. The machine that pressed the vitamin pills had also pressed estrogen pills, and minute amounts of estrogens had transferred to the vitamin pills. This small amount of estrogen on the vitamins had caused a small boy to develop breasts, hence the case report.

I called Dr. Jim to tell him of the vitamin story and asked him to check on what vitamins he or his wife were taking. A few weeks later, Dr. Jim and his wife Gladys showed up in my office without an appointment.

Smiling broadly, Dr. Jim said, "This was too good to tell you over the phone. Gladys has made the diagnosis that you and I missed."

Gladys, laughing as she talked, went on to tell me that, even though they were both in their seventies, they continued to enjoy sex, often several times a week. On hearing the vitamin contamination story, Gladys began looking around her house. She discovered that the vaginal cream prescribed by her gynecologist contained estrogen. She had used it as a lubricant for intercourse for several years. Apparently, Dr. Jim had absorbed enough estrogen through the skin of his penis to grow breasts, but not enough to measure in the blood or urine tests. Gladys had indeed made the diagnosis that both Dr. Jim and I had missed. Within a few months of changing lubricants, Dr. Jim's remaining breast returned to normal size.