

## The rat bin

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The Cantonese saying of “the rat bin on a lamppost” may not be very polite when used to describe a couple. Nonetheless rat bins on lampposts were a common sight in Hong Kong in the last century and until 40 years ago (Fig). Exactly when the first rat bins came into being is uncertain. What is known is that a room for examination of rats was constructed in the new public mortuary buildings at Hill Road in 1904.<sup>1</sup> Rats trapped and collected from rat bins were first screened by the naked eye and if splenic enlargement was found, subjected to microscopic examination for the plague bacilli. When the Bacteriological Institute was opened in 1906, the number of rat examinations increased steadily. According to the Medical and Sanitary Report for the Year 1913,<sup>2</sup> “the rat bins were all attached to lampposts, telephone posts etc, containing a carbolic acid disinfectant to collect these rats. There were 650 of these bins distributed throughout the city and suburbs, and each was visited twice daily by rat collectors who took all rats in them to the Government Bacteriologist.” In 1926, some 90 000 rats were examined as part of the Government’s plague surveillance system but since then, no plague-infected rat has been reported. In the 1950s, as many as 944 rat bins were maintained in the streets, collecting between 500 and 1000 rats a day.<sup>3</sup>

By the mid-1970s, the fate of rat bins took an abrupt turn when their continued existence could no longer be justified. High operational costs, its unsightliness as well as a poor and less-than-presentable design, and as a potential embarrassment to tourists who might use them as litter bins, were some of the concerns.

With hindsight, the rat bins may have served a number of functions; for example, reducing the risk of spread of plague during an outbreak by disinfecting the dead rat at the earliest opportunity and limiting people’s exposure to it, and by detecting early disease that could signal an outbreak. However, it is also true



FIG. Replica of a rat collection bin in the collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences

that for maximal protection at the time of plague, it was important for the public to avoid all contact with rodents, dead or alive, rather than bringing them for disposal in rat bins.<sup>4</sup> Today, dead rodents should be picked up using tongs, placed inside a tough plastic bag, sprayed with disinfectant or diluted bleach until soaked, double bagged, and eventually placed in a covered rubbish bin or at the nearest refuse collection point.<sup>5</sup> Gloves and masks should be worn to avoid direct contact with the rodent. All areas, clothes, and contaminated items should be cleansed and disinfected thoroughly afterwards.

### References

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