THE AFTERGLOW OF DISCOVERY

Following its discovery by Marie and Pierre Curie in 1898, radium became almost an instant novelty. Companies began mining it and selling it for a range of offerings, from medicinal "cures" to children's toys. One of the biggest fads were timepieces with radium-painted luminous dials. Factories across the United States ramped up their production, enlisting many young workers, typically women, to paint glowing numerals onto watch and clock faces.

The factory workers were instructed to use a technique called lip-pointing, which meant using their lips and tongues to shape their paintbrushes to a fine tip. Allegedly, this technique was used because the alternatives, using rags or a water rinse, consumed more time and materials. Later known as the Radium Girls, these women not only ingested radium all day at work, but unaware of any risk, they also painted their lips, teeth, eyelids, fingernails, and clothes with the glowing solution.

Within a few years, some of these women became seriously ill, and some died. Despite varying accounts on whether the danger of the situation was known to some, the tragic story of the Radium Girls reiterates a familiar concept in scientific discovery: We don't know what we don't know. Marie Curie herself went on to experience a range of ailments from radiation exposure.

Time and experience are fundamental to the expansion of knowledge, and there is no limit on how much of each is required before an idea is "ready" for wider circulation and adoption. In this issue of *GT*, contributors review concepts and treatments with long histories in ophthalmology. Over time and through experience, these innovations have been adapted to move closer to the forefront of care. Many unknowns remain, but knowing that is, in itself, progress. ■

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