

Suffering scientists

Four scientists who were injured or killed by their own experiments.

A Sir Humphry Davy (1778–1829)

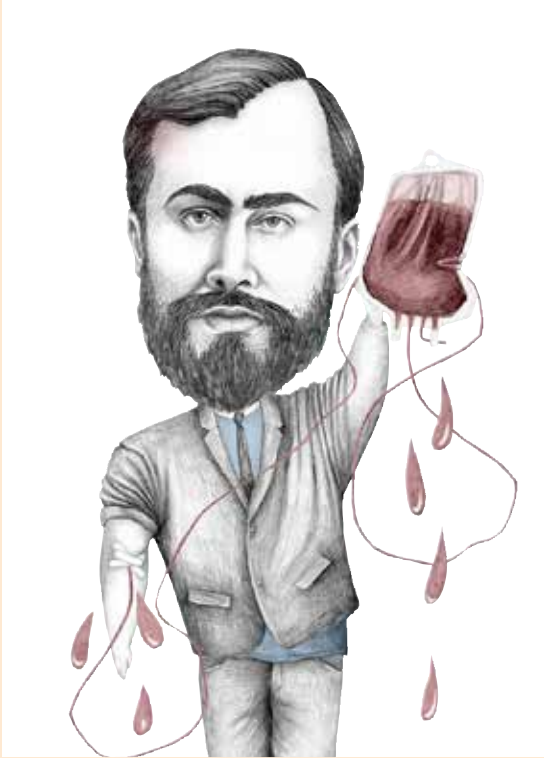


Sir Humphry Davy, the British chemist and inventor, had a very bumpy start to his science career – as a young apprentice he was fired from his job as an apothecary* because he caused too many explosions! When he eventually took up the field of chemistry, he had a habit of inhaling the various gases he was dealing with. Fortunately, this bad habit led to his discovery of the **anaesthetic** properties of nitrous oxide. Unfortunately, the same habit led him to nearly kill himself on many occasions and the frequent poisonings left him an invalid for the last two decades of his life. During this time he also permanently damaged his eyes in a **nitrogen** trichloride explosion.

* apothecary = person who in the past used to make and sell medicines



B Alexander Bogdanov (1873–1928)



Alexander Bogdanov was a Russian physician, philosopher, economist, science fiction writer, and revolutionary. In 1924, he began experiments with **blood transfusion** – in a search for eternal youth. After 11 transfusions (which he performed on himself), he declared that he had stopped going bald, and had improved his eyesight. Unfortunately for Bogdanov, the science of transfusion was not very advanced and Bogdanov had not been testing the health of the blood he was using, or of the **donors**. In 1928, Bogdanov took a transfusion of blood infected with **malaria** and **tuberculosis**, and died soon after.



C Thomas Midgley (1889–1944)



Thomas Midgley was an American chemist who helped to develop leaded petrol (**lead** was added to petrol to make car engines less noisy). General Motors commercialized Midgley's discovery, but there were several deaths from lead poisoning at the factory where the **additive** was produced. In 1924, Midgley took part in a press conference to demonstrate the safety of his product and he inhaled its vapour for a minute. It took him a year to recover from the harmful effects! Weakened by lead poisoning, he contracted **polio** at the age of 51, which left him disabled. He invented a system of ropes and pulleys so that he could pull himself out of bed, but his invention caused his death when he was strangled by the ropes. The negative impact on the environment of leaded petrol seriously damaged his reputation and he has been described as 'the human responsible for most deaths in history'.



D Louis Slotin (1910–1946)



Louis Slotin, a Canadian physicist, worked on the Manhattan project (the American project which designed the first **nuclear** bomb). In 1946, during an experiment with plutonium, he accidentally dropped a container causing a critical reaction. Other scientists in the room witnessed a 'blue glow' and felt a 'heat wave'. Slotin had been exposed to a **lethal dose** of radiation. He rushed outside and was sick and then was taken to hospital. Although volunteers donated blood for transfusions, he died nine days later. Three of the other scientists who were present died later of illnesses related to radiation.