

Feature

Pest-side story: Cruiser and his trainer, from the New York firm The Bed Bug Inspectors, hunt for unwelcome guests in Ariel Leve's apartment

are too sick or elderly, or don't care because they don't manifest bites — and wherever they go, they're transferring them." One person in a high-rise can spread them to the rest of the building, he points out. Yes, they go through the walls.

The pests are driving patients to psychologists' couches. But according to Eisenberg, that's one of the worst places to sit. "Therapists' offices are loaded with bedbugs." Instinctively, I lift my bag off the floor and put it on his desk. Eisenberg is helping British clients implement his treatments. He claims it's an epidemic in Britain. He speaks to pest-control companies and clients constantly — and nobody is denying the problem. Why, then, does it not have the attention and seriousness it attracts in America?

"Europeans, to put it mildly, have a higher tolerance for pests," he says. Both Eisenberg and Sorkin suggest I speak to one of the most dedicated exterminators of bedbugs in the world. He is a full-time bedbug specialist whose attention to detail and understanding of the pest is widely respected in an industry loaded with imposters. It's turned him into somewhat of a guru. And the best part: he's British and based in London.

"Hallelujah!" David Cain calls out when I tell him I'm writing about the pests in Britain. "It's about time." Cain's company, Bedbugs Limited, which is based in Battersea, south London, has in the past seven years treated more than 17,000 properties, on average 10 cases a day. Five years ago it was five or six calls a week and now it's hundreds. His website gets 20,000 hits a day. His small team of skilled technicians will treat infestations anywhere in the country. In London, his fee is £125 per room.

His company has conducted research getting local authorities to supply data under the Freedom of Information Act. From 2003 to 2007, he claims, the problem tripled across London. A spokesman for Rentokil says that there has been a 24% national increase in bedbug jobs over the past year.

Cain is an evangelist for spreading information about the rise of the bedbug. "In 2005," he says, "there was not a single picture of a bedbug on a



website in Europe." Do your research, he advises, because they are here and unlikely to go away: there are some useful websites such as Bedbugfoundation.org or Bedbugs.co.uk. I mention to Cain that I read that Tesco will launch a new bed that repels bugs — it works because the mattress is soaked with bacteria found in probiotic yoghurt that repel them. He lets out an exasperated sigh. "They haven't found a solution for bedbugs," he laughs. "They've found a way to support the dairy industry."

Historically, there is a lot of misinformation about both the bug itself and the treatment. Old-fashioned methods like airing the bed

bring them out of the denial stage. "Social responsibility and communication are paramount," he says. He also predicts that things could get much worse.

"It will equal what is happening in New York if nothing is put in place to stop it. They are an exposure pest. And with the Olympics coming to London, you will have a year's worth of tourism in an eight-week period."

Six weeks after the beagle scratched, Oscar returned with Cruiser, a puggle — a cross-breed of a pug and a beagle — to give what I hoped would be the all-clear verdict. Cruiser got to work. I waited, eager for things to get back to normal.

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BUT THAT'S STILL NO GUARANTEE THE BEDBUGS WON'T RETURN**

and turning the mattress work for dust mites but are in no way effective at eliminating bedbugs. The temperature in the home is no indication either: anything above 12C will enable them to reproduce.

"They're a pest man first picked up in caves," Cain explains. "They're not life-threatening, and they don't transmit disease, but they're very difficult to get rid of." Cain traces the shame and stigma back to the way the problem was dealt with in the 1940s and 50s, when the implication was, if you had bedbugs you were dirty. In some respects, Cain is both optimistic and fatalistic. He hopes the current media attention will focus the British public on the problem at hand and

When Cruiser did not scratch I was elated. But then it hit me: there is a new normal. Because even if your home gets a "clean" bill of health, seconds later you can bring one back in. You can burn your old bed, buy a new mattress, destroy books, toys and clothes — but that's still no guarantee that bedbugs won't return.

The only way not to bring them home again would be to never go out. But even that's not foolproof, as a neighbour could have them, and they migrate through walls. So I take precautions. I know what to look for and I'm on the waiting list for a PackTite. Of course, every time I sit in a taxi or on a plane, I'll worry a little bit. And if I ever got them again? I can't think about it ■

