

Letters to the editor

All named authors must give signed consent to publication. Letters should be typewritten in triple spacing and should be sent in duplicate. References, which must be complete, should be in the Vancouver style and should not exceed 10 in number. We may send letters critical of other authors to them so that their comments may appear in the same issue. The views expressed in the correspondence published in CME are not necessarily those of the Medical Association of South Africa.

Medico-legal matters

To the Editor : We are regular readers of *CME*, and believe that the journal meets all the requirements for an international medical journal.

Unfortunately a few mistakes appeared in a particular article in the October 2002 issue. The article that we refer to is 'Medico-legal matters in rural areas' by Dr Neethia Naidoo.¹

It is stated on the first page of the article that death by snakebite does not require an autopsy. Death by snakebite is unequivocally an unnatural death, and because of this it falls under the Inquest Act 1959 (Act 58 of 1959), and a medico-legal postmortem autopsy is mandatory.

On the second page of the article it is stated: 'During the autopsy a careful examination must be undertaken for signs of disease and injuries. All findings should be documented with the aid of a sketch and/or photographs and the J88 form must be completed.' We wish to stress the fact that photographs **must** be taken, not **may be** taken, for each and every medico-legal autopsy, and lack of funds is not an excuse in this regard.

The postmortem findings in a medico-legal autopsy are not recorded on a J88 form as it is described in the article: the J88 form is used for the rape and assault cases and not for postmortems. Frequently autopsy reports are not completed according to a standard *pro forma*, and many pathologists use a variation of Health Form GW 7/15.

In conclusion, we wish to emphasise that an autopsy on a snakebite victim should be performed by a forensic pathologist; the examination is complicated and usually requires additional laboratory analyses

including histological, haematological and biochemical investigations.

Naidoo N. Medico-legal matters in rural areas. *CME* 2002; **10**: 655-658.

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Dr N Naidoo replies:

I wish to reply to the letter received from Dr SD Zaharie and Professor JBC Botha.

I acknowledge that death by snakebite is unnatural. The sentence should have read: 'Death by snakebite, for example, does require an autopsy and a medico-legal postmortem is mandatory.'

I am in agreement with the comment made in their letter that an autopsy on a snakebite victim should be performed by a forensic pathologist as the examination is complicated and usually requires additional laboratory analysis including histological, haematological and biochemical investigations.

I wish to acknowledge that all findings should be documented with the aid of a sketch and be recorded on form GW 7/15 or in a similar format.

I would like to thank both Dr SD Zaharie and Professor JBC Botha for their useful comments.

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