

Sir,

We write to report two cases of the use of snakes in psychological torture in East Africa. The use of snakes in torture is not new and contemporary evidence exists from Asia as early as 1673.¹ Although a modern symbol of the medical profession,² snakes have always been associated with fear and suffering: for example, in 1813 the poet Shelley referred to the “torture snakes of hell”.³ One reason for this may lie in human evolution as there is evidence that humans and other primates have evolved special systems to detect and fear snakes.⁴⁻⁶ From the second half of the twentieth century there are accounts of snakes being employed in torture in South America,^{7,8} Asia⁹ and South Africa.¹⁰ More recently a python was used in a racist attack in England.¹¹

Reports of torture using snakes in the twenty first century are absent in the medical literature. In 2009 we examined two patients from the same East African country who reported the use of snakes as a means of psychological torture. The first patient was detained in a military establishment for one week, during which he was interrogated, electrocuted and beaten unconscious. The scars on his body were consistent with the account of the alleged torture. This took place in a specially equipped chamber. An unusual feature of this room was a large “tank” inside which the patient could see

live snakes. He could not identify the species of snake, but clearly saw a number of specimens of different sizes. This suggests either a range of species or of ages. When the client was unable to provide the information his torturers sought they threatened to push him inside this tank to be bitten. In this case the physical threat was not carried out, however the patient was very intimidated.

The second case was similar but from a different military establishment within the same country. In addition, the second patient was threatened with being pushed into a caged pool containing crocodiles. These are the only recent specific accounts of the use of reptiles in institutional torture that we have been able to identify. Discussion with colleagues working with torture victims did not identify other cases. The use of snakes in these establishments may have been chosen for a number of reasons. First, although at least one East African tribal group does practise ritual dancing with certain non-venomous species,¹² Africans are particularly fearful of snakes (sometimes exacerbated by associated superstitious beliefs).^{13,14} Second, snake bites are common in Africa¹⁵ and this renders torture difficult to verify. In addition, our evidence suggests that techniques are being shared between establishments within the same country.

Thus, we conclude that methods using

reptiles may pose new challenges to physicians working with victims to document torture.

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