



African Snakebite Institute

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REPTILE NEWS

Hi all,

As many of you know I got myself bitten by a Puff Adder just over two months back. This happened during training and the snake managed to get one fang through the instep of my boot. It was my first bite in 35 years and I hope that these things only happen in a 35 year cycle! Generally speaking the venom of this snake is quite slow in acting giving the vast majority of victims more than enough time to get to a medical facility for proper treatment.

A major problem with cytotoxic venom is that it may cause severe tissue damage and in the case of a bite from a Puff Adder the venom can be injected quite deep as the fangs reach close on 2.5 cm in length. The early administration of antivenom in severe Puff Adder bites is hotly debated and for good reason – a large percentage of snakebite victims that receive antivenom react in an allergic manner and this often results in anaphylaxis. Experienced snakebite doctors know how to handle such cases and even though serious, very few victims die. There is also no guarantee that antivenom will prevent necrosis in a Puff Adder (or Mozambique Spitting Cobra) bite although it appears as though the issue of antivenom and necrosis still needs a lot of investigation. But there is likelihood that the early administration of antivenom will reduce the area of necrosis.

So back to my bite. I was taken to Paardekraal Hospital by Johan Best of Imvuma, wasted some time there and was transferred to Krugersdorp Mediclinic and somewhere along the line I received some serious painkillers by injection. I often hear of people involved in a vehicle accident who have no recollection of the incident and must admit that I have always been a bit sceptical as their version is often required in court proceedings. This actually happened to me and from the time of the bite until three days later I have absolutely no recollection of what happened. In fact, I cannot even recall how I got to hospital! My medical doctors friends tell me that it is a common side-effect of some of the painkiller drugs – losing some short term memory.

I spent a few days in hospital with a swollen foot and quite a bit of pain. I had to keep the foot elevated – the moment it dropped below my heart it throbbed and the pain was virtually unbearable. It appeared that I did not receive much venom from the bite (most snakes have full control over their venom glands and decide how much venom they are going to inject) and antivenom was not required. After a week in hospital I was largely bed-ridden for another two weeks where after I was mobile again and within a week I was back at gym and fully recovered. And

fortunately for me there was no necrosis. So my Puff Adder bite, other than being a very expensive exercise, turned out to be quite a mild bite. Or so I thought.

A month later I visited Johan Best to complete the training that was so rudely interrupted. As I recalled virtually nothing of my bite, I asked Johan to tell me more about what happened immediately after my bite. And here goes – immediately after being bitten I removed my boot to check on the bite and could see that a single fang had entered my foot at the instep. I put the snakes away and told Johan that I was going to drive to the nearest hospital and that I wanted someone to accompany me. A few meters from the vehicle, and within 10 minutes of the bite, I passed out and collapsed on the tarmac. Johan loaded me into a vehicle and, with a colleague to assist, drove me to Paardekraal hospital. I was unconscious with foam coming from my mouth, was a yellowish colour typical of someone who's blood pressure had fallen dramatically and on three occasions Johan had to perform C.P.R. as I stopped breathing.

By the time we arrived at the hospital my blood pressure was back to normal and the bite seemed quite mild to the doctors. I was fully lucid and spoke to the doctors and nurses. So what actually happened? This is my version of events and I will welcome some comments from folks who have far more knowledge and experience in these matters. As a youngster I was bitten by a Night Adder and it was a very mild bite. A year or two I got myself bitten on a finger by a Horned Adder and that was very painful. I had fingers swollen like little sausages for several days. And a few years later I was bitten on a finger by a small Snouted Night Adder. Within minutes I started sneezing and soon thereafter I had difficulty in breathing. I was rushed to Sandton Clinic and after some basic treatment was sent home. There is no antivenom for Night Adder venom. So it turned out that because of the previous bites and exposure to snake venom I was very sensitive to the venom of the Snouted Night Adder and had an allergic reaction.

Over the past 35 years, although I have not had any further bites, I have been exposed to snake venom, either when spat at by various spitting snakes or inhaling vaporized venom when cleaning the enclosures of venomous snakes. And my body obviously has good memory. When I received the Puff Adder bite I reacted in an allergic manner and went into anaphylactic shock, a very serious condition that could quickly kill a person if not treated rapidly. To treat anaphylaxis one needs to be injected with adrenaline and I now carry adrenaline with me when training or doing field work with snakes. It was a lucky escape.

I must thank a few folks for looking after me when I got bitten. My daughter Melissa heard about the bite within minutes and immediately hacked into my Facebook account, contacted Pippa Parker at Struik Publishers as well as my good friend Graham Alexander. Through them she got hold of Dr. Colin Tilbury in Madagascar who immediately contacted the hospital and advised them on what to do. My brother Nico came through to the hospital immediately to assist with the vehicle and snakes as did Karen Avnit who looked after me and nursed me for the next three weeks. Many friends visited me in hospital and I received telephone calls from all over the world, most of which I have no recollection of. Thanks folks – you all make the world a better place. I must however say a special word of thanks to Johan Best who undoubtedly saved my life.

The arrangements for the Swaziland Snakebite Symposium are in full swing, the speakers are in place and we are looking forward to an amazing symposium. I have attached a registration form for those of you that might be keen on attending. Please note that we have limited seats available and the symposium will be fully booked in the very near future.

Snake Courses

The next available snake awareness and venomous snake handling course in Zululand takes place on 24 August 2013 and will be held at DumaZulu Lodge in Hluhluwe. I have attached a booking form.

The next available snake awareness and venomous snake handling course in Gauteng takes place on 31 August 2013 and will be held at Heia Safari Ranch in Muldersdrift. I have attached a booking form.

Snake Book and Snake Poster

I have just received more stock of the **Snakes of Zimbabwe and Botswana** by Broadley and Blaylock from Germany. This book sells for €\$9.95 in Europe and can be ordered from me for R560.00 excluding local postage. It is an important publication for anyone seriously interested in snakes and contains loads of fresh information as well as some taxonomical changes. It will not be available in local book stores.

I have also received stock of the large (A0) laminated **Snakes of Southern Africa** poster that sells for R120.00 excluding postage.

Out of town

I will be in the Namib desert with Prof. Aaron Bauer and his crew for the next week chasing and photographing reptiles.

Kind regards,

Johan Marais

Author of *A Complete Guide to Snakes of Southern Africa*

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