

TORTURE DRUG USED ON KNP JUVENILE ELEPHANTS

“When I came out of the anaesthetic I could not breathe. I tried to tell them this but I could not speak. With what strength I could summon, I gestured for pen and paper. I wrote one single word: ‘*Breathe.*’ It was probably the most traumatic experience of my life.”

The preceding paragraph is not from Robin Cook’s latest medical thriller. It is the true experience of someone who went in for a surgical procedure. And there was worse to come. For days afterwards she would wake up at night, terrified, wet with perspiration and hyper-ventilating. This went on for a week and then, one night, she was woken by her concerned dog pawing her arm and licking her face. She’d been having a bad dream about suffocating. It was then she realised that in her nightmares she’d been reliving the traumatic post-operative experience.

The anaesthetist had used succinylcholine (SuCh), more commonly referred to as scoline. Extensively used as a muscle relaxant during anaesthetics, it has now somewhat gone out of favour.

Scoline has also enjoyed a certain popularity as a torture agent. The October 9, 1970 issue of *Medical World News* made public that “those people who are classed as sexual deviants have been experimented on in mental facilities in the United States.” The experiments were performed on patients who had not been violent and who had engaged as inmates in “deviant sexual behaviour” or who had proved unresponsive to the hospitals’ group therapy programmes.

The inmates were given 20mg to 40mg scoline, which dosage was “sufficient to induce general paralysis and respiratory arrest lasting up to two minutes.” While in a state of terror, feeling they might die, these patients would be lectured to by prison doctors, who would tell them that their behaviour had to change. Arthur Nugent, chief psychiatrist at Vacavale, told the *Medical World News* “The prisons grapevine works fast and even the toughest have come to fear and hate the drug. I don’t blame them. I wouldn’t have the treatment myself for the world.”

One can therefore imagine the cruelty of using scoline to cull animals. Between 1965 and 1994, in the Kruger National Park (KNP), about 16,210 elephants were killed in the cruellest manner possible. The elephants were herded together by helicopter and then darted with scoline.. The drug literally brought elephants to their knees, leaving them to suffocate while remaining fully conscious and unable to move or breathe until death, a process that took about 20 minutes, considerably longer than the four minutes so feared by hospital inmates.

As early as 1968, leading scientists were complaining about the use of scoline as a culling technique, but KNP persisted in using the drug late into its culling programme. By 1995, local and international pressure helped force a moratorium on the culling of elephants.

One might thus wonder why it was necessary for the KNP and the University of the Witwatersrand to indulge themselves in a vivisection experiment on a group of seven 4 – 6 year old juvenile African Elephants. This experiment was published in the South African Journal of Science 98, November/December 2002. The co-authors were Neville

I. Pitts, Cobus Raath and Graham Mitchell. The stated objective was to investigate the mechanism of a delayed effect of SuCh overdose in African Elephants compared to Buffalo, who were known to succumb much earlier.

It is not clear how much this demonstration of “scientific curiosity” cost the taxpayer. What is known is that while the elephants collapsed within 4 – 10 minutes of receiving an overdose of scoline, “respiratory function persisted for about 19 minutes and they died up to 30 minutes later.”

Whilst it is true that the elephants had been anaesthetised for the experiment, other ethical concerns remain. These juvenile elephants, who had been held for 3 – 4 months in enclosures at Skukuza in the KNP, had been control animals in a vaccine trial and “in accordance with standard practice were to be euthanased at the end of the vaccine trial.” Then the traumatised babies were sold off to Wits university for vivisection purposes.

The questions that remain to be answered are:

- where did all the young elephants originally come from?
- what happened to their families? (baby elephants usually remain with their mothers for about 10 years)
- Scoline, which had been used in KNP for decades, had been abandoned as too cruel for use as a culling method. So why would this experiment even be allowed to take place?
- Why did the vaccine control animals automatically have to be euthanased?

We find it surprising that the Animal Ethics and Screening Committee of the University of the Witwatersrand approved this experiment (No. 94/96/2b), when its only justification was to ascertain why it took the elephants so long to die, compared to other animals, which is pretty pointless, as it was never going to be used again even if culling did resume.

As the use of scoline for the culling of elephants was already of concern in 1968 and officially discontinued in 1995 the conclusion that “succinylcholine (SuCh) is unsuitable for culling” appears at to be at best, *a poste priori* and at worst, a case of “publish or perish.”