



On 'fowl' hooking and Chris Bateman taking Annette's 'bate'...

To the Editor: I read with interest and amusement the article by Chris Bateman¹ on the increasingly important topic of sleep apnoea and of course what you might call its earliest stage of manifestation... snoring. Bateman is a marvelous journalist with a robust sense of humour and much experience. He also writes a characterful fisherman's column in the local Cape press. A man of many parts. All of them good.

He was, however, misguided when he contacted Annette van Rensburg, who runs a Sleep Apnoea Support Group. Annette intrepidly criss-crosses the country espousing the continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine with all the enthusiasm of what some feel is an unguided missile. But definitely very good for CPAP sales and PR. In her view it's the ultimate and only weapon.

The treatment of snoring and sleep apnoea is complex and depends on the severity. There is no doubt that certain cases are appropriate for surgical intervention, some for a combination of surgery and CPAP and others for CPAP alone.

But for Annette to come out with an *ex cathedra* comment that patients should stay away from ENT surgeons at all costs emphasises her sad misapprehension.

The assessment of any case of snoring and sleep apnoea should encompass appropriate examination of the oropharyngeal and laryngeal areas together with postnasal and nasal assessments. It is in this precise area that obstruction primarily occurs. And for her to suggest that the ENT, who with all respect is probably the best qualified in this area, should be vigorously excluded in assessment is an example of gross misinformation.

Annette, however, is not to be trifled with. I know from personal experience, having once been invited to take part in a talk show with her — and can she talk. She's not verbally disadvantaged. She demanded to know my qualifications before she was prepared to consider me an appropriate 'opponent' with whom she would deign to joust. And joust she did. She'd arranged a meeting at UCT medical school the next morning which I managed to attend. It was an eye opener. A Damascus experience.

She opened her meeting with the question 'Who's had the operation?', not specifying what operation, and then launched forth into what I can only describe as a tirade. When I had the temerity to ask a question I was viewed with instant distaste and photographed, at her insistence, by her husband. I presumed I'd be slotted into some sort of Annette van Rensburg police file. When I tried another question I was told I could not ask questions because 'it was her meeting'. I left with

utmost discretion to hear later that Caesar-style multiple knives had then been plunged into my back.

UCT medical school should be more careful about who they allow to hold meetings on their territory. It gives the unsuspecting public the false impression that the speaker carries academic credentials.

Snoring, sleep apnoea and their important sequelae are becoming increasingly recognised. Their assessment often requires a team approach. However, if you ever wish for enthusiastic amusement, don't hesitate to attend the 'Annette van Rensburg road show'. It offers a delectably one-sided approach to a complex problem. 'CPAP *uber alles*'. . . it's a pity she hasn't read the literature on various modalities of treatment, but then when one's single-mindedly focused that would only confuse the messianic message. She doesn't carry any official support from the Sleep Society, and with all respect some senior members regard her as an enthusiastic embarrassment, but I have no doubt that suppliers and purveyors of CPAP will understandably be muted in their criticism. She is after all an enthusiastic, free, totally focused PR . . . what more could you ask?

John Steer

Prince Alfred House
35 Waterloo Road
Wynberg Village
7800

1. Bateman C. Sleep disorder adds to disease burden (Izindaba). *S Afr Med J* 2003; 93: 100-101.

Chris Bateman replies: The risk of being 'misguided' comes with the journalistic territory, I'm afraid, although I disagree with John Steer on the cause of the flaw in my article. The flaw was not so much in what I did (i.e. contact Annette van Rensburg) but in what I did *not* do (i.e. elicit the ENT point of view to round out the story).

His letter entertainingly illustrates the 'lively debates' between ENT surgeons and pulmonologists which I refer to in the piece and, more importantly, helps broaden the overall perspective.

Sayers Bursary Fund

To the Editor: The Outeniqua Branch of the South African Medical Association administers the Sayers Bursary and invites applications. The Bursary is for postgraduate study or research at any university in South Africa. It is intended for postgraduate study in medicine or research into one or more facets of the advanced fields of surgery and/or medicine at any university in the country.