



## The year of the goat

Rural third world hospitals tend to attract the lunatic fringe – at least among their expatriate medical staff. A proportion of doctors come for the ‘experience’ before they settle down in their communities of origin, some because of strong beliefs, some because they don’t fit into their home medical communities very well. At least one I worked with came because, despite his impressive experience and CV, no one in the UK would employ him. (He told me this himself and after a few weeks I had no difficulty believing him. He later married a local woman and was forced to leave in a hurry as he was facing death threats.) I expected that the new Belgian would fit in well to our rural Zululand hospital when he told me, within five minutes of meeting him, that he had made a career mistake: He should have become an F16 fighter pilot. He proved to be a competent doctor, albeit with an aggressive surgical orientation. One night a phone kept ringing in a locked building near his house, so he broke a window to silence it.

Ludwig the Belgian was on duty one Sunday when the local police arrived. In the back of their utility vehicle they had an unconscious man with a head injury and a well looking goat. Could our doctor please

examine the goat and determine whether it had been the victim of an indecent assault? They reported that the owners of the goat had caught the man in a compromising position vis-à-vis the goat. The owners’ response had been, perhaps, a little exuberant. The police did not request that the injured man be examined. It was clear where their sympathy lay.

After a delicate negotiation, it was agreed that an attempt would be made to examine the goat, on condition that the alleged perpetrator could also be examined. With some reluctance the police agreed. Unfortunately, the goat did not readily agree. Cusco designed his speculum without adequate consideration of goat anatomy. I suspect a vet would have had better facilities for restraining an animal for an intimate examination. No sperm were detected. We did not have the option of sending a specimen for DNA analysis. The unconscious man proved to have a serious head injury and was admitted to our hospital, assessed and then promptly referred to the tertiary neurosurgical unit four hours away by road, where he later died. To my knowledge, no further action was taken against the goat’s owners. Their response was considered entirely understandable in the circumstances.

This is a column written from the swamp. The term is taken from the book by Donald Schon<sup>1</sup> where he talks about the crisis of confidence in professional knowledge thus:

*In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solutions.*

1. Schon DA. Educating the reflective practitioner. Jossey-Bass Publishers 1990.

## Contributions

We invite amusing contributions to this column which should be relevant to the swamp and not more than 600 words.

Ludwig didn’t last long. After a couple of months he left for the tertiary hospital’s general surgical department. He phoned a few weeks later to describe his very satisfying day, which had consisted of 23 laparotomies in 24 hours.