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Response to comment on: Failure of a new antivenom to treat Echis ocellatus snake bite in rural Ghana: the importance of quality surveillance

Mr Kanthawala maintains that, since the trade description of Bharat ASNA Antivenom C (‘Snake Venom Antiserum African’ - ASNA-C) ‘clearly mentions the use of antivenom against E. carinatus snake bite’, Visser et al.1 ‘have used the wrong product for treating the patients’ envenomed by Echis ocellatus in Ghana. However, in the list of immunising venoms used to produce ASNA-C (his Table 1), the name ‘Echis carinatus’ is sandwiched between those of 10 purely African species (albeit wrongly spelled) while the label of this antivenom clearly targets its use for Africa. ‘Echis carinatus’ originally included the saw-scaled or carpet vipers of Africa before separate species such as E. ocellatus, E. leucogaster and E. pyramidium were distinguished.2 In view of this ambiguity, it was surely misleading and irresponsible of Bharat to market ASNA-C in countries where E. ocellatus is recognised to be the most important cause of snake bite, particularly, as seems likely, they are knowingly using E. carinatus venom from Mamallapuram, India for production of this antivenom. Bharat knew that this antivenom had negligible activity against E. ocellatus venom when tested pre-clinically at WHO’s Collaborative Centre at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, UK. Mr Kanthawala claims that ‘Our product is being shipped to various countries in Africa and has been used effectively to treat patients with snake bites’. There is absolutely no published evidence to support this assertion whereas the spectacular failure of this product in Ghana1 resonates with anecdotal observations of therapeutic disasters in other African countries, such as Kenya, where Ministries of Health have been prevailed upon to buy ASNA-C.

We discovered further evidence of Bharat’s indiscriminate marketing of ASNA-C during a recent WHO-supported assessment of snake bite issues in Cambodia (Southeast Asia). Government-run hospitals in Prey Veng and Kampong Cham Provinces had been supplied with Bharat ASNA Antivenom C (Snake venom Antiserum African - ASNA-C) batch A2607003 through the Ministry of Health’s Central Medical Store in Phnom Penh. This antivenom has no efficacy against locally important venomous snake species such as Naja kaouthia, N. siamensis, Bungarus candidus, Daboia siamensis, Calloselasma rhodostoma and Cryptelytrops albolabris.
Mr Kanthawala insists that ‘Bharat Serums and Vaccines Ltd . . . are committed to manufacturing quality products’. If only they were equally committed to responsible marketing of their antivenoms, according to the stated range of specificity and potency!

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Reference


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