

The diving doctor's diary

A fishy tale from Port Vila (with a sting in the tail)

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Envenomation, marine animals, case reports

Technical diving is dangerous. I'll tell you why. There is a local drop off in Port Vila, Vanuatu, that I have been exploring, taking some video footage of the really interesting corals that live there. The reef starts at about 50 m and drops to 180 m. It is a great site.

The last time I dived there, I was getting kitted up and when I put my bootie on I felt a mild pain in my left big toe. It got worse until eventually I had to take my boot off. A large centipede crawled out, leaped overboard and swam off before I had a chance to kill it. That was three weeks ago and the toe is still slightly tender.

The next time I dived the site, I met a couple of mates at 6.30 am at the beach where I have my small boat moored. I swam out to get the boat, then loaded it up with all our gear. We were just about to set off from the beach when I trod on something sharp. It didn't hurt too much but I could see a small bleeding cut on the side of my heel (Figure 1). It felt a bit odd and I wondered if I had stood on a sea urchin. I grabbed my mask and peered into the water to see a bearded ghou (*Inimicus caledonicus*) on the sand.¹ The wound was starting to ache a bit now, so I thought we better stick around for a while before embarking on a deep dive, in case the pain got worse.

Figure 1

The innocuous-looking injury from this scorpionfish sting is barely visible on the author's instep



Within five minutes I was in severe pain in my heel and up the side of my leg; it felt like a big thorn was driving into my foot. I asked the villagers there to bring some hot water and I put my foot into it. This seemed not to help at all and soon I was beside myself with the pain. The locals all came to look at the white man in pain, and started discussing how they never walk out at low tide and how if I ever wished to borrow their canoe to get my boat I was welcome. Not wishing to appear impolite, I tried to seem grateful for the offer whilst I urged my mate to unload the gear out of the boat, put the boat back on the mooring and get me home a.s.a.p. Meanwhile the locals had moved on to how one of their friends got nine holes in his foot from the same fish (I had only one hole) and "he was a big strong man but he cried for hours". They discussed local leaf remedies and one disappeared into the bush to find the correct plant. Another offered to urinate on my foot. I had more faith in local anaesthesia (or even amputation by now) so, with assistance, got into the car and my buddy drove me home.

A friend from the hospital (who was in the middle of a bout of malaria so wasn't feeling too chipper himself) met me at my house armed with a bagful of local anaesthetic and morphine. I had continued the hot-water treatment but the pain was extraordinary – 8 out of 10. I was sweating and hyperventilating so my head was starting to spin.

I explained how to perform a sural nerve block on my ankle with the local anaesthetic (Ropivacaine 1% 10 mls), and he injected the area. I barely felt the needle. Within a few minutes I felt the numbness creeping down my foot until it reached the affected area...BLISS! The transformation that came over me was nothing short of miraculous. I still felt a bit rough, but 1000% better than before. Well enough to get the books out and study my nemesis!

That afternoon I felt a bit nauseated and washed out, probably just coming down from the burst of adrenaline. The local anaesthetic wore off about 15 hours later; fortunately the venom wore off some time earlier. For the next few days I just felt like I had a very deep bruise in the foot, with some very minor local swelling. Not much to show for all that pain! Ah...life in paradise.

Reference

- 1 Rifkin J, Williamson J. Venomous fish. In: Williamson JA, Fenner PJ, Burnett JW, Rifkin J, editors. *Venomous and poisonous marine animals*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press; 1996. p. 381-2.

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