ANIL AGGRAWAL'S
Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology
The world's first online journal devoted entirely to forensic medicine and toxicology · Published 1 January and 1 July

VOL. 11, NO. 1
Downloaded from www.anilaggrawal.com · ISSN 0972-8074 (Online) · https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_011_no_001/reviews/tb/page006.html

Book Reviews: Technical Books Section

...AN INVALUABLE BOOK FOR MEDICAL STUDENTS ...I understand there are very few forensic text books in India, which have published color figures of such great quality. The results are good and make the book easy on the eye. Overall, I would heartily recommend this book to all undergraduate students in India and around the world...

Textbook of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, 15th Edition, edited by V.V. Pillay. Softcover, 7" x 10". Paras Medical Publisher, 5-1-475, First Floor, Putlibowli, Hyderabad-500 095, India. Email – parasmedpub@hotmail.com. Publication Date 2010. 660 pages, ISBN-13: 978-81-8191-296-1, Price Indian Rupees 575.00.

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FOREN

This book, which is an Indian publication, has been around for 45 years (the first edition came in 1965) and this is the 15th Edition. In this respect alone it is a remarkable book.

Invariably, comparisons will be drawn with Western texts on the subject except that there are no longer any books of this type in the West to draw comparisons with! As such this book could be said to have no comparison or rather, no modern benchmark to compare it with.

The reviewer has practised Forensic medicine for almost forty years and was largely brought up on Taylor's Medical Jurisprudence and Gradwhol's Forensic Medicine, both of which are comparable texts in that they encompassed the broad field of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology. Both books have not been revised in years and "Taylor" lost its character completely as a result of the last revision by the late Arthur Keith Mant in 1984. Both these books can now be considered to be well and truly deceased. Newer books like the one by Bernard Knight and the one by Vincent DiMaio are books on Forensic Pathology.

View this book on Amazon

The present attitude in the West is to separate these subjects and whether this is a wise move or not remains to be seen. The reason that Forensic Medicine has split up in this manner is probably largely due to the fact that Forensic Medicine is no longer an undergraduate subject in Britain (except in a few Scottish Universities). As such forensic matters are no longer the exclusive provinces of medical men. One wonders if this is a good thing or not.

…The editor, Vijay Pillay, is the Professor of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology at the Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences and Research in Cochin, Kerala. A number of contributors (including a chief photographer and a chief illustrator) all drawn from India assist him in writing this book…

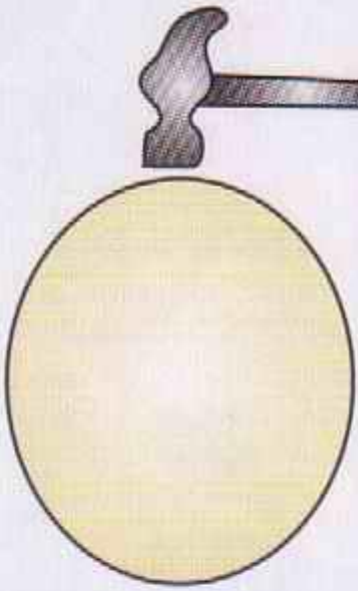
In this respect one could say that Vijay Pillay's book is of the old type and one hopes that it will continue to keep the broader concept of Forensic Medicine intact. Pillay's book is of course not up to the standard of Taylor and Gradwohl. It was never meant to be and in a way it would be unfair to compare this tome with the once established greats, particularly when the title informs us that it is meant to be a textbook and not a reference manual. The book is comparable to "Forensic Medicine" by Simpson and Knight but unfortunately "Simpson" hasn't been revised since 1996.

The editor, Vijay Pillay, is the Professor of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology at the Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences and Research in Cochin, Kerala. A number of contributors (including a chief photographer and a chief illustrator) all drawn from India assist him in writing this book. The book is therefore totally an Indian product and reflects the legal system and forensic problems of that country although most aspects of forensic medicine are applicable universally. The book is also largely meant for the Indian market.

A typical page from the book. Virtually every page is lavishly illustrated in this manner (please click to

of a fall on the feet or
the mandible as in the
chin.

- A fissured fracture whi
table of the skull is re
fracture. It is usually t
fractures in such cases, s





I understand, that the book was previously attributed to M.K.R Krishnan, which of course explains the forty-five-year publishing run. There is no further mention of the history of the book, except for the facts that the first edition came out in 1965, the eleventh in 1999, the 12th in 2001 and so on.

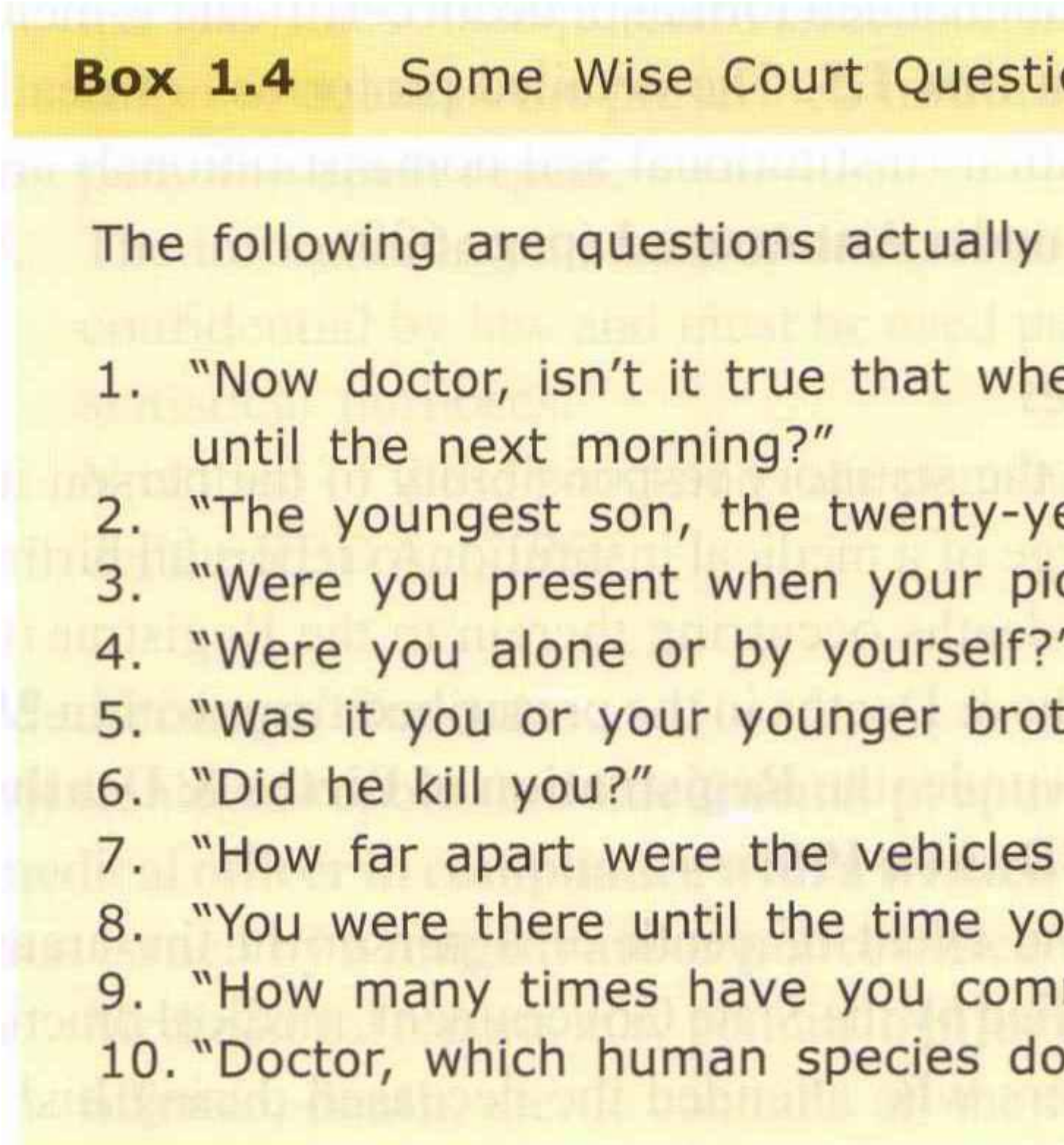
The book is divided into five sections. Section 1 deals with Clinical Forensic Medicine, Section 2 with Forensic Pathology, section 3 with Sexual jurisprudence, section 4 with Forensic science and section 5 with Toxicology. In addition, there are a number of annexures, such as medical certification of the cause of death, oaths and codes of ethics for medical professionals, and so on and so forth.

As is almost standard with this type of book the opening chapter is on Legal Procedure. The legal system discussed is of course the Indian system and the reviewer was interested to note that Coroner's Inquests have been totally abolished in India to be replaced by the far superior American style Medical Examiner's System.

The opening chapter is followed by chapters on Medical Law and Ethics and on Euthanasia. Chapter 4 is on Identification and deals with standard methods of identification. Forensic DNA Typing, which is a part of identification has been dealt with in chapter 24 (in the section on Forensic Science). This chapter is illustrated with a snappy, condensed version of the Pitchfork Case better known as The Blooding. Case reports are a fascinating aspect of any forensic text and it is hoped that the editor will include even more case studies in future editions.

Death and changes after death are discussed in the traditional and standard manner in chapter 7 entitled Thanatology-Postmortem changes.

A sample box from the book. This box appears on page 9. There are virtually hundreds of such boxes in



Box 1.4 Some Wise Court Questi

The following are questions actually

1. "Now doctor, isn't it true that whe until the next morning?"
2. "The youngest son, the twenty-ye
3. "Were you present when your pi
4. "Were you alone or by yourself?'
5. "Was it you or your younger brot
6. "Did he kill you?"
7. "How far apart were the vehicles
8. "You were there until the time yo
9. "How many times have you com
10. "Doctor, which human species do

Chapter 8, Medicolegal Autopsy, is a standard description of the autopsy applicable to any part of the world except for a few minor peculiarities. Under "Requirements of a medicolegal autopsy", on page 150, the author lists common salt (powder) and sodium fluoride in addition to formalin and rectified spirit. The reviewer could not think of a need for salt in the mortuary and wonders if he is missing something here! (Incidentally, Fluoride Oxalate is used in Britain in preference to Sodium oxalate to preserve blood samples).

Injuries, which always form a substantial part of forensic texts, encompass four chapters: Mechanical Injuries (chapter 9), Firearm and explosive Injuries (chapter 10), Regional Injuries

(chapter 11) and Injuries due to Heat, Lighting, Electrocution and Radiation (chapter 12). Thermal injuries including electrical injuries part has been done very well. Almost all the colour illustrations in this book pertain to injuries.

When reading the chapters on injuries I expected exotic injuries peculiar to India and was somewhat disappointed. The injuries discussed are the type one will find anywhere in the world. “Country made” firearms are very briefly mentioned but are not further discussed. The editor should consider the inclusion of at least a few exotic injuries in future editions to give the book a truly Indian flavour!

The Medicolegal Aspects of Injuries and Death (chapter 13) discusses injuries and death with reference to the Indian Penal Code. Western readers would find the brief mentions of “harassment for dowry” and “dowry death” interesting and rather exotic.

The chapter on Mechanical Asphyxia (chapter 14) mentions garrotting and also includes drowning.

The next short chapters are mostly on clinical matters: Starvation, Impotence Frigidity and Sterility, Virginity Pregnancy and Delivery, Abortion.

Infanticide is discussed in chapter 20, which briefly mentions Child Abuse and Sudden Infant Death. Sexual Offences and Paraphilias and Forensic Psychiatry follow.

Human rights, Torture and the Medical Profession is dealt with in an earlier chapter (chapter 6). It includes some interesting boxes such as box 6.1 which gives chronological evaluation of Human rights in India.

Crime scene investigation, trace evidence, Forensic DNA typing and newer methods of suspect interrogation are discussed in section IV (Chapters 22 till 25)

…Trace evidence runs through the standard Kastle-Meyer test (still used in Britain as a presumptive test!) and other tests for blood, blood groups and briefly mentions blood spatter. Seminal stain identification is discussed with reference to the standard tests (Florence, Berberio) and one presumes that these tests still continue to be used in India…

Trace evidence runs through the standard Kastle-Meyer test (still used in Britain as a presumptive test!) and other tests for blood, blood groups and briefly mentions blood spatter. Seminal stain identification is discussed with reference to the standard tests (Florence, Berberio) and one presumes that these tests still continue to be used in India. Serological methods would eventually render these tests obsolete however the old methods retain a historical fascination.

The section on Toxicology takes up slightly less than half the pages of the book and is therefore quite comprehensive. There are 15 chapters in this section (chapters 26 through 40), which are separately numbered. The chapters follow in a traditional pattern. After an introductory chapter, chapters on Caustics, Inorganic Elements and Heavy Metals follow. Irritant Plants, Bites and Stings, Somniferous Poisons, Alcohols, Pesticides, Deliriants and Psychotropics, Cardiotoxic Poisons, Asphyxiants, Paracetamol and Salicylates are all given separate chapters. The last chapter is on Food Poisoning.

The chapter on Irritant Plants give prominence to plants found on the Indian sub-continent such as Ricinus communis, Abrus precatorius and Gloriosa superba. The Georgi Markov case is mentioned to illustrate ricin.

The chapter on Bites and Stings is mostly on snakebite and is well written and illustrated. This subject is quite obviously important in tropical countries.

As one would expect the chapter on alcohol (Inebriant Poisons) is partly clinically orientated and discusses ethanol and traffic accidents and examination for drunkenness.

Another page from the book (please click to enlarge)

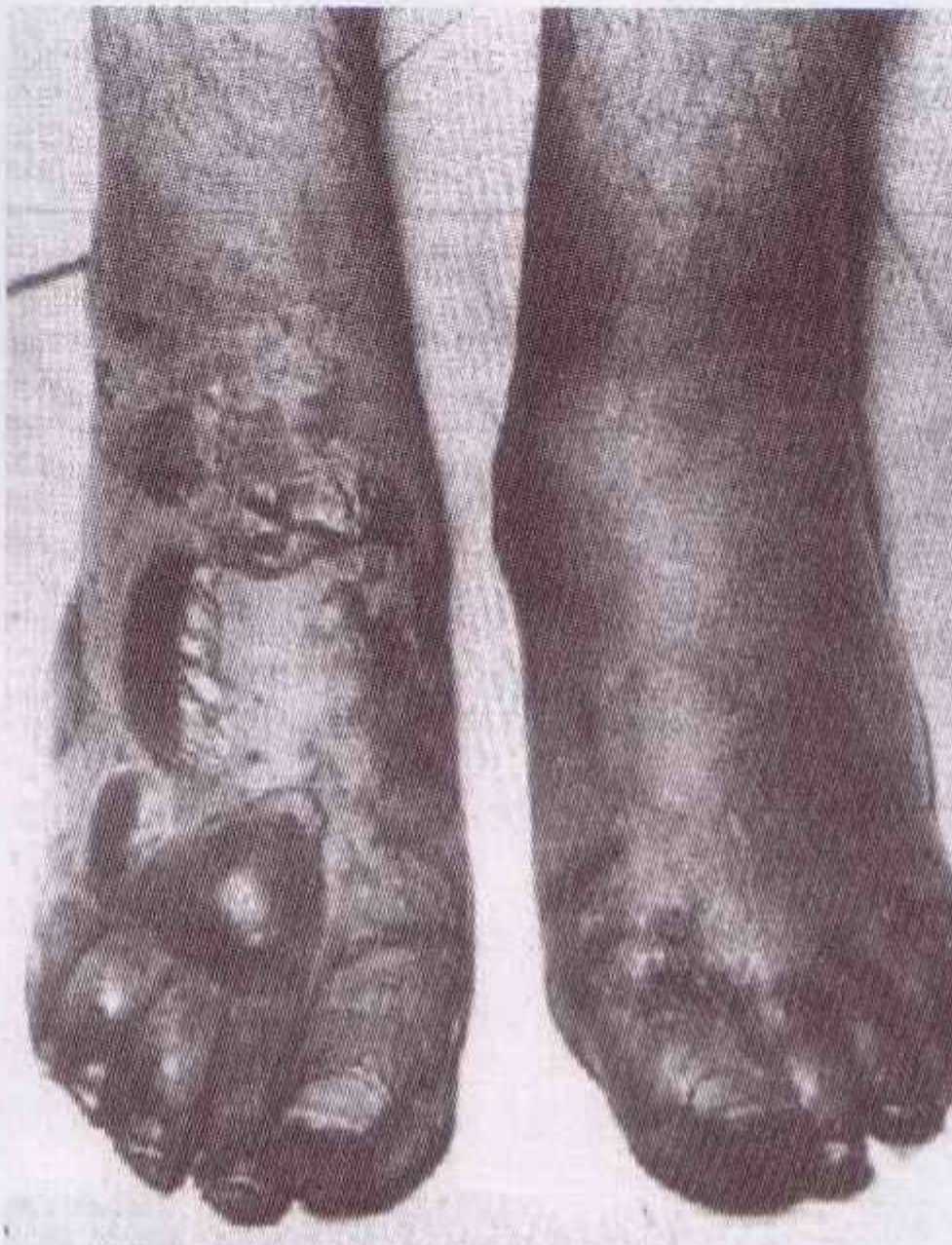


Fig. 12.14 Trench foot

The chapter on Pesticides is quite appropriate for the Indian sub-continent. This again is a well-written chapter but curiously includes Strychnine, which one would think would be more at home under poisonous plants. Presumably Strychnine is still used as a pesticide in India. (The reviewer has very personal experience of using Strychnine to keep stray dog numbers under control).

Not surprisingly the case of “The Amazing” Dr. Palmer is used to illustrate this chapter. The author should consider using the case of the even more amazing Dr Harold Shipman in future editions. Although Palmer holds a certain morbid fascination Shipman is better documented.

A number of annexures more or less complete the book. In addition to those mentioned earlier, there are annexures on The Preconception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of sex selection) Act, 1994, which I believe is a contentious subject in India.

Interestingly each chapter carries a list of references (the editor prefers to call them “further reading”). There are a large number of colour as well as black and white photographs and line drawings. Interesting quotations embellish most chapters. The truly remarkable feature of this book is its photographs. Dr. Ullasa Shetty is mentioned as the Chief Photographer in the contributors section, and he needs to be lauded for his efforts.

The English reads well although one cannot help noticing the occasional use of colonial English! In any case Indian English is now accepted just like American English.

The print quality of the book is excellent. One is mindful of the costs involved in producing a book of this nature and the necessity to keep the price at an affordable level.

I understand there are very few forensic text books in India, which have published color figures of such great quality. The results are good and make the book easy on the eye.

Overall, I would heartily recommend this book to all undergraduate students in India and around the world.

-Gyan Fernando
Dr. Gyan Fernando first studied Forensic Medicine as a medical student at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) where he first assisted at an autopsy. After five years of Forensic Medicine as the Judicial Medical Officer in a remote district of Sri Lanka, which gave him considerable insight into matters forensic, he moved to Britain. At present, he is the Home Office Accredited Consultant Forensic Pathologist for Devon and Cornwall. He no longer practises Clinical Forensic Medicine as this



involves getting up in the middle of the night!

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