

Letters

To the Editors:

Sleeping sickness and teaching of medical students

Ceylon Medical Journal, 2000; **45**: 39

Saroj Jayasinghe's article (*Ceylon Medical Journal* 1999; **44**: 179) implies that generations of medical students in Sri Lanka have wasted thousands of hours over the past 25 years studying trypanosomiasis, particularly because it was a medical laboratory technician who actually discovered the first case to be diagnosed in this country (1).

As teachers of medical parasitology, we too are guilty of continuing this tradition of making students learn about diseases that do not occur here. But while entertaining us with dramatic scenarios and calculations, he conveniently ignores the fact that a curriculum wherein students learn only about diseases that are common in a given country, would be very short-sighted and narrow-minded. When we formulated our MBBS curriculum at Ragama in 1995, we thought it important that our graduates should not only be "able to diagnose, treat and prevent diseases common in Sri Lanka", but also know about diseases that are of "major public importance in a global context"(2). This was because we took into account the inexorable progress of globalisation. Our graduates will practise medicine in many different parts of the world in the future. International travel by Sri Lankans will also inevitable increase. We aim to enable our students to become good doctors by national as well as international standards.

Sleeping sickness is endemic in 36 countries of the

African continent and American trypanosomiasis affects much of south and central america, as well as parts of North America (3). According to the WHO's estimates, the trypanosomiasis are among the leading parasitic causes of mortality and morbidity, along with malaria, lymphatic filariasis, intestinal nematode infections, schistosomiasis and leishmaniases (4). That is why our students are offered one 45-minute lecture on the trypanosomiasis, and taught to recognise a trypomastigote in a blood film (a process that takes no longer than 15 minutes), during the 5 years that they spend with us, and not because we want them to be able to identify an obscure animal parasite that accidentally infects a human.

References

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3. Cook G; ed. *Manson's Tropical Diseases*. 20th ed. London: WB Saunders; 1996: 1171-212.
4. World Health Organization. *The World Health Report 1999: Making a difference*. Geneva: World Health Organization; 1999: 99-109.

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