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Author's Response

Sir,

We very much welcome the interest toward the new proposed unified classification of asphyxia. This standardized classification was pieced together by drawing mainstream definitions from a thorough review of forensic textbooks and literature. This effort was undertaken after noticing that similar research designs could lead to totally different results, depending on the definitions used, and that closely comparable cases were called differently by equally competent forensic pathologists or medicolegal doctors.

Despite being a first step toward reaching a global agreement on a unified classification, this standardized classification might not be perfect yet. The International Network for Forensic Research (INFOR) was recently founded by Prof. Duarte Vieira and Dr. Anny Sauvageau. This network research group is now conducting an international consultation to achieve a global agreement on a standardized classification of asphyxia. A questionnaire was designed to evaluate which parts of the standardized classification and which definitions the international forensic community is ready to adopt, and which parts need to be revised. Of course, mutual concessions are going to be necessary to achieve international agreement; but as a scientific community, we cannot continue to use different definitions and classifications depending on our geographical location or depending on our favorite textbook.

As Dr. Byard correctly pointed out in his letter, the standardized classification is relying on a combination of circumstances and autopsy findings. To avoid this problem, he is suggesting classifying asphyxia based on the underlying mechanisms: asphyxia by failure in the supply of adequate amounts of oxygen, by failure to transfer oxygen from the environment into the blood, by failure of transport of oxygen, by failure of cells to take up oxygen, and by complex cases and/or combinations of the above. Although this classification is interesting conceptually in teaching and understanding the various pathophysiological problems in asphyxia, it is not a very practical classification for the everyday practice.

As a scientific community, forensic pathologists and medicolegal doctors need to agree on a unified classification of asphyxia. INFOR will submit the classification of Sauvageau & Boghossian to international consultation and a modified standardized classification will be created from it. The practice of forensic pathology and legal medicine has been for a long time part art and part science. To grow as a scientific discipline, we have to make an effort to shift away from art and move toward a more scientific approach, and the standardization of classifications and definitions is an important step in that direction.

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