

## Authors' Response

Sir,

We agree with most of the comments. The four cases presented here are well documented and share a great deal of sharp features of the so-called spontaneous human combustion (SHC). We would like to underline some points: (i) We do not agree with the interpretation of the authors, which leads to classify SHC into two groups: those where there is a fast intervention of the emergency team, these cases being supposedly obvious cases of SHC, with burning confined to the body; and those where there is a postponed emergency reaction, these cases being able to extend to the vicinity. In our opinion, SHC is a slow combustion of the body and does not tend to extend to the vicinity. Furthermore, the arson experts are able to distinguish between fire of the apartment that secondarily burns the body (death usually occurring by smoke inhalation) and burning of the body that would secondarily extend to the vicinity and the apartment. We do believe that the strange phenomenon of SHC, probably because of the "candle effect," does not tend to extend to the vicinity and is able to slowly burn the body, with a significant amount of smoke impregnating the whole room. (ii) In one of the four cases, the span of time is <1 h. This is an important fact, because, to our knowledge, only one case reported on in the literature states a span of time of <5 h. The idea that this slow consuming of the body takes quite a long time (e.g., 12 h) is probably wrong. (iii) In the four cases reported here, cigarettes and matches

are considered as the origin of the fire. Although we read the same fact in the literature, it remains difficult to understand, because igniting the skin seems to be quite difficult. (iv) Although alcohol is a classical feature quoted in the literature, the presence of alcohol is not compulsory. Alcohol certainly plays a role in the alteration of the coordination or the behavior and perhaps favors the ignition of the piece of clothes. (v) In one of the cases, there is a dog in the apartment, which will die from smoke inhalation (carbon monoxide). This is a rare occurrence in the literature. Only two other cases, one of which is recent (1), were reported on. Again this states that there is a great deal of smoke release during the process and that the burning of the body is slow and incomplete.

## Reference

1. Palmiere C, Staub C, La Harpe R, Mangin P. Ignition of a human body by a modest external source: a case report. *Forensic Sci Int* 2009;188:17–9.

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