

10.3 ANIMAL HEALTH SURVEILLANCE AFTER INCLUSION IN THE HERD.....	35
10.4 MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS	37
11 IMMUNIZATION REGIMENS AND USE OF ADJUVANT.....	37
11.1 ANIMALS USED IN ANTIVENOM PRODUCTION.....	38
11.2 VENOMS USED FOR IMMUNIZATION	38
11.3 PREPARATION OF VENOM DOSES.....	39
11.4 DETOXIFICATION OF VENOM.....	40
11.5 IMMUNOLOGICAL ADJUVANTS	40
11.6 PREPARATION OF IMMUNOGEN IN ADJUVANTS.....	40
11.7 IMMUNIZATION OF ANIMALS.....	41
11.8 TRACEABILITY OF THE IMMUNIZATION PROCESS	44
11.9 MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS	44
12 COLLECTION AND CONTROL OF ANIMAL PLASMA FOR FRACTIONATION.....	45
12.1 HEALTH CONTROL OF THE ANIMAL PRIOR TO AND DURING BLEEDING SESSIONS.....	45
12.2 BLOOD/PLASMA COLLECTION PREMISES	46
12.3 BLOOD/PLASMA COLLECTION SESSION.....	46
12.4 LABELLING AND IDENTIFICATION	46
12.4.1 Whole blood collection and storage	47
12.4.2 Plasma collection by automatic apheresis and storage.....	48
12.5 POOLING.....	49
12.6 CONTROL OF PLASMA PRIOR TO FRACTIONATION.....	49
12.7 MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS	50
13 PURIFICATION OF IMMUNOGLOBULINS AND IMMUNOGLOBULIN FRAGMENTS IN THE MANUFACTURE OF ANTIVENOMS.....	50
13.1 GOOD MANUFACTURING PRACTICES	51
13.2 PURIFICATION OF THE ACTIVE SUBSTANCE	51
13.2.1 Purification of intact IgG antivenoms	52
13.2.2 Purification of F(ab') ₂ antivenoms	54
13.2.3 Purification of Fab antivenoms	57
13.2.4 Optional additional steps used by some manufacturers	59
13.2.5 Formulation.....	60
13.2.6 Analysis of bulk product before dispensing	60
13.2.7 Dispensing and labelling of final product	61
13.2.8 Use of preservatives	61
13.2.9 Freeze-drying	62
13.2.10 Archive samples of antivenoms.....	62
13.3 PHARMACOKINETIC AND PHARMACODYNAMIC PROPERTIES OF IgG, F(ab') ₂ AND FAB	62
13.4 MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS	64
14 CONTROL OF INFECTIOUS RISKS.....	65
14.1 BACKGROUND	65
14.2 RISK OF VIRAL CONTAMINATION OF THE STARTING PLASMA	65
14.3 VIRAL VALIDATION OF MANUFACTURING PROCESSES.....	68
14.3.1 Down-scale experiments.....	68
14.3.2 Selection of viruses for the validation of antivenoms production processes	69
14.4 VIRAL VALIDATION STUDIES OF ANTIVENOMS OR OTHER ANIMAL-DERIVED ANTISERA	70
14.4.1 Caprylic acid treatment	71
14.4.2 Validation of dedicated viral reduction treatments	75
14.4.3 Other viral inactivation treatments currently not used in antivenoms manufacture	75
14.4.4 Possible contribution of phenol and cresols.....	76
14.5 PRODUCTION-SCALE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROCESS STEPS CONTRIBUTING TO VIRAL SAFETY.....	76
14.6 TRANSMISSIBLE SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHY (TSE)	77
14.7 MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS	78
15 QUALITY CONTROL OF ANTIVENOMS	79
15.1 ROUTINE ASSAYS	79

15.1.1 Solubility (freeze-dried preparations)	79
15.1.2 Extractable volume	79
15.1.3 Venom-neutralising potency test	80
15.1.4 Osmolality	81
15.1.5 Identity test	81
15.1.6 Protein concentration	82
15.1.7 Purity	82
15.1.8 Molecular-size distribution	83
15.1.9 Pyrogen test	83
15.1.10 Abnormal toxicity test	83
15.1.11 Sterility test	83
15.1.12 Concentration of sodium chloride and other excipients	84
15.1.13 Determination of pH	84
15.1.14 Concentration of preservatives	84
15.1.15 Agents used in plasma fractionation (ammonium sulphate, caprylic acid, enzymes)	84
15.1.16 Visual inspection	85
15.1.17 Residual moisture (freeze-dried preparations)	85
15.2 ANTIVENOM REFERENCE PREPARATIONS	85
15.3 MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS	86
16 STABILITY, STORAGE AND DISTRIBUTION OF ANTIVENOMS	86
16.1 STABILITY	86
16.2 STORAGE	87
16.3 DISTRIBUTION	87
16.4 MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS	87
17 PRECLINICAL ASSESSMENT OF ANTIVENOMS	88
17.1 INTRODUCTION	88
17.2 ESSENTIAL ASSAY FOR PRECLINICAL TESTING OF ANTIVENOMS: PREVENTION OF LETHALITY	89
17.3 ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED ASSAYS FOR PRECLINICAL TESTING OF ANTIVENOMS	89
17.3.1 Neutralization of venom haemorrhagic activity	89
17.3.2 Neutralization of venom necrotising activity	90
17.3.3 Neutralization of venom procoagulant effect	91
17.3.4 Neutralization of in vivo venom defibrinogenating activity	92
17.3.5 Neutralization of venom myotoxic activity	92
17.3.6 Neutralization of venom neurotoxic activity	93
17.4 DEVELOPMENT OF ALTERNATIVE ASSAYS TO REPLACE MURINE LETHALITY TESTING	93
17.5 LIMITATIONS OF PRECLINICAL ASSAYS	94
17.6 MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS	94
18 CLINICAL ASSESSMENT OF ANTIVENOMS	95
18.1 INTRODUCTION	95
18.1.1 Phase I studies	95
18.1.2 Phase II/III studies	96
18.2 ANTIVENOM CLINICAL STUDIES	96
18.2.1 Dose finding studies	96
18.2.2 Randomised controlled trials	97
18.2.3 Efficacy endpoints for antivenom trials	97
18.2.4 Safety endpoints for antivenom trials	97
18.2.5 Challenges in clinical testing of antivenoms	98
18.3 POST-MARKETING SURVEILLANCE (PHASE IV)	98
18.3.1 Role	98
18.3.2 Possible approaches	98
18.3.3 Responses to results of post-marketing studies	99
18.4 MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS	99
19 ROLE OF NATIONAL REGULATORY AUTHORITIES	100
19.1 CONTROL OF THE NEUTRALIZING EFFICACY OF VENOMS BY ANTIVENOMS PREPARATIONS	102
19.2 ESTABLISHMENT LICENSE AND INSPECTIONS	

102	
19.3	IMPACT OF GOOD MANUFACTURING PRACTICES 102
19.4	INSPECTIONS..... 103
	AUTHORS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 105
	REFERENCES..... 109
	APPENDIX:WORLDWIDE DISTRIBUTION OF MEDICALLY IMPORTANT VENOMOUS SNAKES... 119

limited distribution

1

1 INTRODUCTION

Snake antivenom immunoglobulins (antivenoms) are the only therapeutic products for the treatment of envenomings due to snakebites. The unavailability of effective snake anti-venom immunoglobulins to treat the specific types of envenomings encountered in various regions of the world has become a critical health issue at global level. The crisis has reached its greatest intensity in sub-Saharan Africa, but other regions, such as South East Asia, are also suffering from a lack of effective and affordable products. The complexity of the production of efficient antivenoms, in particular the importance of preparing appropriate snake venom mixtures for the production of hyperimmune plasma (source of antivenom immunoglobulins), the decreasing number of producers and the fragility of the production systems in developing countries further jeopardize the availability of efficient antivenoms in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America. Most of the remaining current producers are located in countries where the application of quality and safety standards needs to be improved. In October 2005, the WHO Expert Committee for Biological Standardization (ECBS) recognized the extent of the problem and asked the WHO secretariat to support and strengthen world capacity to ensure long-term and sufficient supply of safe and efficient antivenoms. In March 2007, antivenom immunoglobulins were included in the WHO Essential Medicines List (WHO, 2007a), acknowledging their role in a primary health care system. Urgent measures are needed to support the design of immunizing snake venom mixtures that can be used to make the right polyspecific antivenoms products for various geographical areas of the world. Sustainable availability of effective and safe antivenom immunoglobulins should be ensured and production systems of these effective treatments should be strengthened at global level. Meaningful preclinical assessment of the neutralizing capacity of anti-snake venom immunoglobulins needs to be undertaken before products are used in any country and Medicines Regulatory Authorities should enforce the licensing of these products in all countries, before being used in the population. The present "WHO Guidelines on Production, Control and Regulation of snake antivenoms immunoglobulins" were developed in response to the above mentioned needs. These Guidelines cover all the steps involved into the production, control and regulation of venoms and antivenoms. It is hoped that this document, by covering comprehensively the current existing experience in the manufacture, control, and preclinical and clinical assessment of these products will serve as a guide to national control authorities and manufacturers to support worldwide production of these essential medicines. In addition to the need for appropriate antivenoms to be produced, other issues need to be addressed in ensuring both that antivenoms are appropriately used, and that outcomes for envenomed patients improve. These include availability of antivenoms and appropriate distribution policies, affordability of envenoming treatment and training

of health workers to allow safe and effective use of antivenoms and effective management of snakebites envenoming. These important issues are outside the scope of this document and so will not be further addressed specifically herein, but should be considered as vital components in the care pathway for envenoming.

2 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS USED

The definitions given below apply to the terms used in these Recommendations. They may have different meanings in other contexts.

Apheresis - Procedure whereby blood is removed from the donor, separated by physical means into components and one or more of them returned to the donor.

Antivenoms - A purified fraction of immunoglobulins or immunoglobulin fragments fractionated from the plasma of animals that have been immunized against a snake venom or a snake venom mixture (also called antivenins).

Batch - A defined quantity of starting material or product manufactured in a single process or series of processes so that it is expected to be homogeneous.

Batch records - All documents associated with the manufacture of a batch of bulk product or finished product. They provide a history of each batch of product and of all circumstances pertinent to the quality of the final product.

Blood collection - A procedure whereby a single donation of blood is collected in an anticoagulant and/or stabilizing solution, under conditions designed to minimise microbiological contamination of the resulting donation.

Bulk product - Any product that has completed all processing stages up to, but not including, aseptic filling and final packaging.

BVDV - Bovine virus diarrhea virus. An enveloped, single stranded RNA virus that can be used for viral validation studies.

CITES - Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. It is an international agreement between governments. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

Clean area - An area with defined environmental control of particulate and microbial contamination, constructed and used in such a way to reduce the introduction, generation, and retention of contaminants within the area.

Combined antivenoms - Antivenoms directed against several venoms prepared by mixing different monospecific plasma prior to the plasma fractionation process, or purified monospecific antivenom fractions prior to the aseptic filling stage.

Contamination - The undesired introduction of impurities of a microbiological or chemical nature, or of foreign matter, into or on to a starting material or intermediate during production, sampling, packaging, or repackaging, storage or transport.

CPV - Canine Parvovirus. A non-enveloped, single stranded DNA virus that can be used virus for viral validation studies.

Cross-contamination - Contamination of a starting material, intermediate product or finished product with another starting material or product during production.

Cross-reactivity - The ability of an antivenom raised against a venom, or a group of

venoms, to react and neutralize the toxic effects of the venom of a related species not included in the immunizing mixture.

Dessication – A storage process where venoms are dehydrated under vacuum in the presence of calcium salts or phosphoric acid.

ED₅₀ - Median Effective dose: quantity of antivenom that protects 50% of the mice injected with a number of LD_{50s} of venom.

EAV – Equine arteritis virus, an enveloped virus found in horses; this virus has been used in viral validation studies.

EIA – Enzyme immunoassay.

EMCV - Encephalomyocarditis virus. A non-enveloped, single stranded, RNA virus that can be used for viral validation studies.

Envenoming - Process by which venom is injected into a human by the bite of a poisonous snake, leading to pathological manifestations (also called envenomation).

Fab – A monovalent immunoglobulin fragment resulting from the proteolytic digestion of immunoglobulins by papain.

F(ab')₂ – A bivalent immunoglobulin fragment resulting from the proteolytic digestion of immunoglobulins by pepsin.

FCA – Freund complete adjuvant. It may be used in the immunization process of animals to enhance the immune response to venoms

FIA – Freund incomplete adjuvant.

FPLC – Fast-performance-liquid-chromatography

Fractionation - Large-scale process by which animal plasma is separated to isolate the immunoglobulin fraction, that is further processed for therapeutic use or may be subjected to digestion with pepsin or papain to generate immunoglobulin fragments. The term fractionation is usually used to describe a sequence of processes, generally including plasma protein precipitation and/or chromatography, ultrafiltration, and filtration steps.

Fractionator - A company or an organization performing plasma fractionation to manufacture antivenom immunoglobulins or fragments.

GMP - Good Manufacturing Practice- that part of Quality Assurance which ensures that products are consistently produced and controlled to the quality standards appropriate to their intended use and as required by the marketing authorization or product specification. It is concerned with both production and quality control.

HPLC – High-performance-liquid-chromatography

Immunization- a process by which an animal (typically horse or sheep) is injected with venom (s) to produce a long-lasting and high titer antibody response against the lethal and other deleterious components in the immunogen.

Immunoglobulin – Antibody molecule generated by immunizing an animal (most often horse) against a snake venom or a snake venom mixture. Immunoglobulin G (IgG) is the most abundant immunoglobulin fraction.

IgG – Immunoglobulin G, the most abundant immunoglobulin fraction.

IgM – Immunoglobulin M.

In-process control - Checks performed during production to monitor and, if necessary, to adjust the process to ensure that the antivenom conforms to specifications. The control of the environment or equipment may also be regarded as part of in-process

control.

LD₅₀ - Lethal dose 50%: it is the amount of snake venoms, injected intravenously or intraperitoneally, that leads to the death of 50% of the animals of a group after an established period of time (usually 24 to 48 hrs)

Manual apheresis – A plasma collection procedure where whole blood is collected and erythrocytes are reinfused to the animal within 24 hours.

Manufacture - all operations of procurement of materials (including collection of plasma for fractionation) and products, production, quality control, release, storage, distribution, and quality assurance of plasma-derived medicinal products.

Milking - The process of collecting venom from live snakes.

Monospecific - defines antivenoms that are limited in use to a single species of venomous snake or to a few closely related species whose venoms show clinically effective cross neutralization with the serum. The term "monovalent" is often used and has the same meaning.

Nanofilter - Filters, most typically with effective pore sizes of 50 nm or below, designed to remove viruses from protein solutions.

NRA - National Regulatory Authorities. WHO terminology to refer to national medicines regulatory authorities. Such authorities promulgate medicine regulations and enforce them.

Pasteurization- A process of heating protein in solution, typically at 60°C for 10 hours

Plasma- the liquid portion remaining after separation of the cellular elements from blood collected in a receptacle containing an anticoagulant, or separated by continuous filtration or centrifugation of anticoagulated blood in an apheresis procedure.

Plasmapheresis- Procedure in which whole blood is removed from the donor, the plasma is separated from the cellular elements by sedimentation, filtration, or centrifugation, and at least the red blood cells are returned to the donor

Polyspecific - Defines antivenoms that are obtained by fractionating the plasma from animals immunized by a mixture of venoms from several species of venomous snakes. The term "polyvalent" is often used and has the same meaning.

Prion- A particle of protein that is thought to be able to self-replicate and to be the agent of infection in a variety of diseases of the nervous system, such as mad cow disease and other transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE). It is generally believed not to contain nucleic acid.

PRV- Pseudorabies virus, a lipid-enveloped virus that can serve as a model for pathogenic equine herpesvirus.

Production- all operations involved in the preparation of anti-snakevenoms immunoglobulins, from preparation of venoms, immunization of animals, collection of blood or plasma, processing and packaging, to its completion as a finished product.

PRV- Pseudo Rabies virus. An enveloped, double stranded DNA virus that can be used as a model for viral validation studies.

Quarantine- A period of enforced isolation and observation typically to contain the spread of an infectious disease among animals. The same terminology applies to the period of isolation used to perform quality control of plasma prior to fractionation, or of antivenom immunoglobulins prior to release and distribution.

SDS-PAGE – Sodium dodecyl sulphate – polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis

Serum- A liquid portion remaining after clotting of the blood. Serum has a composition similar to plasma (including the immunoglobulins) apart from fibrinogen and other coagulation factors which constitute the fibrin clot.

Sindbis virus- An enveloped, single stranded, RNA virus that can be used as a model for viral validation studies.

SOP - Standard operating procedure. An authorized written procedure giving instructions for performing operations not necessarily specific to a given product or material (e.g. equipment operation, maintenance and cleaning; validation; cleaning of premises and environmental control; sampling and inspection). Certain SOPs may be used to supplement product-specific master and batch production documentation.

Toxin - A poisonous substance, especially a protein, which is produced by living cells or organisms and is capable of causing disease when introduced into the body tissues. It is often also capable of inducing neutralizing antibodies or antitoxins.

Traceability - Ability to trace each individual snake, venom, animal, or unit of blood or plasma used and the final fractionated antivenom immunoglobulin batch. The term is used to describe forward and reverse tracings

TSE - Transmissible spongiform encephalopathy

Venom - The toxic secretion of a specialized venom gland which, in the case of snakes, is delivered through the fangs and provokes deleterious effects. Venoms usually comprise many different protein components of variable structure and toxicity.

Validation - Action of proving, in accordance with the principles of GMP, that any procedure, process, equipment, material, activity, or system actually leads to the expected results.

Viral inactivation- A process of enhancing viral safety in which viruses are intentionally "killed".

Viral reduction- A process of enhancing viral safety in which viruses are inactivated and/or removed.

Viral removal- A process of enhancing viral safety by partitioning viruses from the protein(s) of interest.

VSV- Vesicular Stomatitis virus. An enveloped, single stranded RNA virus that can be present in horses, and that can be used for viral validation studies.

WFI - Water for injection.

WNV - West Nile virus. An enveloped, single stranded RNA virus that can be present in horses, and that can be used for viral validation studies.

3 GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Snake antivenom immunoglobulins (henceforth referred to as antivenoms) are the only specific treatment for envenoming by snakebites. They are produced by the fractionation of plasma obtained usually from large domestic animals hyper-immunized against relevant venoms. Important but low use antivenoms may be prepared in small animals. When injected into an envenomed human patient, antivenom will neutralize any of the venoms used in its production, and will also in some instances neutralize venoms from closely related species.

3.1 Historical background

Shortly after the identification of diphtheria and tetanus toxins, von Behring and Kitasato reported the antitoxic properties of the serum of animals immunized against diphtheria or tetanus toxins and suggested the use of antisera for the treatment of these diseases (von Behring and Kitasato, 1890). In 1894, von Behring diphtheria antitoxin was first successfully administered by Roux to save children suffering from severe diphtheria. Thus, serum therapy was born and the antitoxin was manufactured by Burroughs Wellcome in UK. The same year, Calmette (1894) and Physalix and Bertrand (1894) simultaneously, but independently, presented during the same session of the same meeting their observations on the antitoxic properties of the serum of rabbits and guinea pigs immunized against cobra and viper venoms, respectively. Immediately after his discovery of "antivenin serum-therapy", Albert Calmette was actively involved in proving its efficacy in the treatment of human envenoming. The first horse-derived antivenom sera that he prepared were already under clinical evaluation in 1895 by Hankin in India and by Lépinay in Viet Nam. The latter reported the first successful use of antivenin serum therapy in patients in 1896 (Calmette, 1897).

3.2 The use of serum versus plasma as source material

Historically, the pioneers Calmette, Vital Brazil and others, used serum separated from the blood of hyperimmunized horses for the preparation of antivenom ("antivenin serum-therapy"). Later, antibodies (immunoglobulins) were demonstrated to be the active molecules responsible for the therapeutic action of "antivenom serum". Subsequently, immunoglobulins, or immunoglobulin fragments (F(ab')₂), purified from serum were used instead of crude serum (Pope, 1939a; 1939b). Nowadays, plasmapheresis, whereby erythrocytes are re-injected to the animal within 24 hours of blood collection, is commonly employed to reduce anaemia in the hyperimmunized animal that donates the plasma. Accordingly, it is, almost exclusively, plasma rather than serum that is used as the starting material for the extraction of the immunoglobulin or its fragments (WHO, 1981; Raw et al., 1991; Grandgeorge et al., 1996). Thus "antivenom immunoglobulin" is the preferred term, rather than "anti-snakebite serum" or "antiserum" which is no longer accurate.

3.3 Antivenom purification methods and product safety

Purification methods were introduced to reduce the frequency of antivenom reactions by removing the Fc fragment from IgG, thus preventing complement activation and perhaps reducing the intensity of immune-complex formation responsible for late antivenom reactions (serum sickness). For 60-70 years, IgG F(ab')₂ fragments have been widely used. However, antivenom protein aggregation, and not Fc-mediated complement activation, was increasingly identified as a major cause of antivenom reactions. The recent use of intact IgG prepared by precipitation of non-IgG plasma proteins using caprylic acid, revealed that such IgG preparations could be less reactogenic than some conventional F(ab')₂ preparations (Otero-Patiño et al., 1998). Thus, a critical issue in antivenom safety likely lies in the physico-chemical characteristics of antivenoms and not exclusively in the type of neutralizing molecules constituting the active substance. It is also important to ensure that the current methodologies to produce antivenoms provides a sufficient margin of safety with regards to the risk of transmission of zoonosis.

3.4 Pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics of antivenoms

Rapid elimination of some therapeutic antivenoms (e.g. when Fab fragments are used) has led to recurrence of envenoming in patients. However, the choice of preparing IgG or fragments appears to depend on the size and toxicokinetics of the principal toxin(s) of the venoms. Large M_r bivalent antibodies (IgG and $F(ab')_2$ fragments) may be effective for the complete and permanent neutralization of intravascular toxins (e.g. procoagulant enzymes) which have a long half-life in envenomed patients, whereas low M_r and monovalent IgG fragments such as Fab may be more appropriate against low molecular mass neurotoxins which are rapidly distributed to their tissue targets and are rapidly eliminated from the patient's body (Gutiérrez et al., 2003)

3.5 Need for National and Regional reference venom preparations

Antivenom production is technically demanding. The need to design appropriate polyspecific antivenoms is supported by the difference in venom composition among venomous animals, associated with the fact that (a) most countries are inhabited by several medically important species, and (b) that in many circumstances there is no distinctive clinical syndrome to direct the use of monospecific antivenoms. However, similarities in the venom toxins of closely related venomous species may result in para-specific neutralization thus reducing the number of venoms required for the preparation of polyspecific antivenoms. Para-specific neutralization should be tested in animal models and ideally by clinical studies in envenomed patients. Preclinical testing of antivenoms against medically important venoms present in each geographical region or country is a pre-requisite for product licenses and batch approval, and should always precede clinical use in envenomed patients. This requires efforts by manufacturers and/or regulators to establish regional or national reference venom preparations that can be used to test the neutralization capacity of antivenoms.

4 EPIDEMIOLOGY BACKGROUND

The incidence of snakebites in different parts of the world and the recognition of the particular species of greatest medical importance is fundamental to the appropriate design of monospecific and polyspecific antivenoms in countries and regions. Updated knowledge is therefore highly relevant to antivenoms producers and regulators, especially for the selection of the most appropriate venoms, or venom mixtures, to be utilised in the manufacture and quality control of antivenoms.

4.1 Global burden of snakebites

Envenoming and deaths resulting from snakebites are a particularly important public health problem in rural tropical areas of Asia, Africa, Latin America and Papua New Guinea (WHO, 2007b). Agricultural workers and children are the most affected groups. Epidemiological assessment of the true incidence of global snakebite mortality and morbidity has been hindered by several well recognised problems (Swaroop and Grabb, 1954; Chippaux 1998). Snakebites and associated mortality are under-reported because many victims (20-70% in some studies) do not seek treatment in government dispensaries or hospitals and hence are not recorded. This occurs because medical posts in regions of highest incidence are unable to keep accurate records and because death certification of snakebite is often imprecise, despite the increased precision of recent ICD indexing (Snow *et al.*, 1994; Fox *et al.*, 2006). Correctly designed population

surveys, in which questionnaires are distributed to randomly selected households in well demographed areas, are the only reliable method for estimating the true burden of snakebites in rural areas. Results of the few such surveys that have been performed have produced surprisingly high rates of bites, deaths and permanent sequelae of envenoming (Hati et al., 1992; Pugh et al., 1980; Sharma et al., 2004; Snow et al., 1994; Trape et al., 2001). However, because of the heterogeneity of snakebite incidence within countries, results of surveys of local areas cannot be extrapolated to give total national values. Most of the available data suffer from these deficiencies and, in general, should be regarded as underestimates and approximations. Despite these limitations, the available information suggests that the total number of snakebite envenomings worldwide may be around 2.5 million cases per year, with more than 100,000 deaths (Chippaux, 1998). In addition, the number of people left with permanent sequelae as a result of these envenomings is likely to be higher than the number of fatalities (WHO, 2007b). As already identified, most of the estimated burden of snakebite is from South and Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Central and South America. The current literature on snakebite epidemiology highlights the inadequacy of available data on this neglected tropical disease. It reinforces the need to improve reporting and record keeping of venomous bites in health facilities, support financially high quality epidemiological studies of snakebite in different regions, and improve the training of medical personnel. Making venomous bites notifiable and fully implementing the use of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision (WHO 2007c) in official death certification (e.g. T 63.0 snake venom) would further help to determine the burden of snakebite more accurately (see available data on snakebites from countries in the different regions in Appendix).

4.2 Main recommendations

In most parts of the world, snakebites are under-reported and in some parts completely unreported. This deficiency in surveillance and the paucity of properly designed epidemiological studies explain why the impact of this important public health problem has remained for so long unrecognised and neglected. National health authorities should be encouraged to improve the scope and precision of their epidemiological surveillance of this disease by:

- Improving the training of all medical personnel so that they are more aware of the local causes, manifestations and treatment of venomous bites
- Making venomous bites notifiable diseases
- Setting up standardized and consistent epidemiological surveys
- Improving the reporting and record keeping of venomous bites by hospitals, clinics, dispensaries and primary health care posts, relating the bites to the causative snakes venomous species wherever possible
- Fully implementing the use of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision version for 2007 in official death certification (e.g. T 63.0 snake venom). <http://www.who.int/classifications/apps/icd/icd10online/>

5 MEDICALLY IMPORTANT VENOMOUS SNAKES

5.1 Essential medically important venoms

Based on current herpetological and medical literature, it is possible to partially prioritize the species of snakes that are of greatest medical importance in different regions. Detailed statistics on the species of snakes responsible for envenomings and fatalities throughout the world are lacking, except for a few epidemiological studies which include rigorous identification of the biting snake in a few scattered localities. Thus, establishing a list of medically important species for different countries relies, at least in part, on extrapolation from the few known studies, as well as on the biology of the snake species concerned: e.g. where species of a group of snakes are known to be of public health importance, based on epidemiological studies, it seems reasonable to deduce that closely related species with similar natural history occurring in hitherto unstudied regions are also likely to be medically important. Examples include Asian cobras (*Naja*) in several understudied regions of Asia, lowland *Bungarus* species in Asia, and spitting cobras (*Naja*) in Africa.

Tables 1-4 list the most medically important venomous snake species in each of four broad geographical regions. Species listed in these tables are either those which are common or widespread in areas with large human populations and which cause numerous snakebites, resulting in high levels of morbidity, disability or mortality amongst victims, or poorly known species that are strongly suspected of falling into this category, or species which cause major and life threatening envenoming responsive to antivenom, but are not common causes of bites. The venoms of these species should be considered a starting point for establishing the most important targets for antivenom production. The need for additional epidemiological and toxinological research to better define which venoms to include and exclude for antivenom production in various regions, territories and countries around the world is emphasised.

Detailed country-specific data on species believed to contribute most to the global burden of injury, and/or which pose the most significant risk of morbidity or mortality are provided in Appendix.

Table 1: Medically important venomous snakes: Africa and the Middle East
North Africa/Middle East

Atractaspis andersonii; *Bitis arietans*; *Cerastes cerastes*; *Cerastes gasperettii*; *Daboia mauritanica*; *Daboia palaestinae*; *Echis carinatus*; *Echis coloratus*; *Echis omanensis*; *Echis pyramidum*; *Macrovipera lebetina*; *Montivipera xanthina*; *Naja haje*; *Naja nigricollis*; *Naja oxiana*; *Pseudocerastes persicus*

Central Sub-Saharan Africa

Naja nigricollis; *Bitis arietans*; *Bitis gabonica*; *Bitis nasicornis*; *Dendroaspis jamesoni*; *Dendroaspis polylepis*; *Echis leucogaster*; *Echis ocellatus*; *Echis pyramidum*; *Naja anchietae*; *Naja haje*; *Naja melanoleuca*

Eastern Sub-Saharan Africa

Bitis arietans; *Bitis gabonica*; *Bitis nasicornis*; *Dendroaspis angusticeps*; *Dendroaspis jamesoni*; *Dendroaspis polylepis*; *Naja nigricollis*; *Echis pyramidum*; *Naja anchietae*; *Naja annulifera*; *Naja ashei*; *Naja haje*; *Naja melanoleuca*; *Naja mossambica*

Southern Sub-Saharan Africa

Bitis arietans; *Dendroaspis angusticeps*; *Dendroaspis polylepis*; *Naja anchietae*; *Naja annulifera*; *Naja mossambica*; *Naja nigricincta*; *Naja nivea*

Western Sub-Saharan Africa

Bitis arietans; Bitis gabonica; Bitis nasicornis; Bitis rhinoceros; Cerastes cerastes; Echis jogeri; Echis leucogaster; Echis ocellatus; Dendroaspis jamesoni; Dendroaspis viridis; Dendroaspis polylepis; Naja haje; Naja katiensis; Naja melanoleuca; Naja nigricollis

Table 2: Medically important venomous snakes: Asia and Australasia**Central Asia**

Echis carinatus; Gloydius halys; Macrovipera lebetina; Naja oxiana

East Asia

Bungarus multicinctus; Cryptelytrops albolabris; Daboia russelli; Deinagkistrodon acutus; Gloydius blomhoffii; Gloydius brevicaudus; Naja atra; Protobothrops flavoviridis; Protobothrops mucrosquamatus; Viridovipera stejnegeri

South Asia

Bungarus caeruleus; Bungarus ceylonicus; Bungarus niger; Bungarus sindanus; Bungarus walli; Cryptelytrops erythurus; Daboia russelii; Echis carinatus; Hypnale hypnale; Macrovipera lebetina; Naja naja; Naja oxiana; Naja kaouthia

South-East Asia (Excluding Indonesian West Papua)

Bungarus candidus; Bungarus magnimaculatus; Bungarus multicinctus; Bungarus slowinskii; Calloselasma rhodostoma; albolabris; Cryptelytrops erythurus; Cryptelytrops insularis; Daboia siamensis; Deinagkistrodon acutus; Naja atra; Naja kaouthia; Naja mandalayensis; Naja philippinensis; Naja samarensis; Naja siamensis; Naja sputatrix; Naja sumatrana

Australo-Papua (Includes Indonesian West Papua)

Acanthophis laevis; Notechis scutatus; Oxyuranus scutellatus; Pseudonaja affinis; Pseudonaja nuchalis; Pseudonaja textilis

Table 3: Medically important venomous snakes: Europe**Central Europe**

Vipera ammodytes

Eastern Europe

Vipera berus

Western Europe

Vipera aspis, Vipera berus

Table 4: Medically important venomous snakes: the Americas**North America**

Agkistrodon bilineatus, Agkistrodon contortrix, Agkistrodon piscivorus, Agkistrodon taylori Bothrops asper, Crotalus adamanteus; Crotalus atrox; Crotalus helleri, Crotalus horridus; Crotalus oreganus; Crotalus simus; Crotalus scutulatus; Crotalus totonacus; Crotalus viridis

Caribbean

Bothrops cf. atrox (Trinidad); Bothrops caribbaeus (St Lucia); Bothrops lanceolatus (Martinique); Crotalus durissus (Aruba)

Central America

Bothrops asper; Crotalus simus

South America

Bothrops alternatus; *Bothrops asper*; *Bothrops atrox*; *Bothrops brazili*; *Bothrops bilineatus*; *Bothrops diporus*; *Bothrops jararaca*; *Bothrops jararacussu*; *Bothrops leucurus*; *Bothrops matogrossensis*; *Bothrops moojeni*; *Bothrops pictus*; *Bothrops venezuelensis*; *Crotalus durissus*; *Lachesis muta*

5.2 Minor venomous species for which antivenoms may be needed

In many countries, there are species of snakes that rarely bite humans but are capable of causing severe or fatal envenoming. Their medical importance may not justify inclusion of their venoms in the immunizing mixture for production of polyspecific antivenoms but the need to prepare antivenoms against these species needs to be carefully analysed.

5.2.1 Paraspecific coverage by existing antivenoms

In some cases, such as with some Central American pit vipers (genera *Agkistrodon*, *Porthidium*, *Bothriechis*, *Atropoides* etc.), there is clinically effective cross-neutralisation of venoms by standard national polyspecific antivenoms (Theakston & Warrell, 1991).

5.2.2 Need for specific antivenoms

In other cases, there is no effective paraspecific neutralisation and so national manufacturers may consider that the production of a small volume of monospecific antivenom is justified for use in the rare but potentially fatal cases of envenoming provided that these can be identified. Such antivenoms are currently available for envenoming by the boomslang (*Dispholidus typus*), desert black snake (*Walterinnesia aegyptia*), Arabian burrowing asp (*Atractaspis andersoni*) (Ismail et al., 2007), king cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah*), Malayan krait (*Bungarus candidus*) (Chanhome et al., 2002) "yamakagashi" (*Rhabdophis tigrinus*) and red-necked keelback (*R. subminiatus*), Martinique's "Fer-de-lance" (*Bothrops lanceolatus*), St Lucia's *B. caribbaeus*, some species of American coral snake (*Micrurus*).

No antivenoms are currently available for envenoming by species such as African bush vipers (*Atheris*, *Proatheris* etc.), berg adder (*Bitis atropos*) and several other small southern African *Bitis* spp. (e.g. *B. peringueyi*), Sri Lankan and south-west Indian humpnosed vipers (*Hypnale* spp.) (Joseph et al., 2007, Ariaratnam et al., 2008), many Asian pit vipers ("*Trimeresurus*" sensu lato), some species of kraits (e.g. *B. niger*) and all but one species of burrowing asp (genus *Atractaspis*).

An alternative for antivenom production against species that induce few, but potentially severe accidents, is to manufacture polyspecific antivenoms for broadly distributed groups that have similar venom compositions (e.g. African *Dendroaspis* and *Atractaspis*; Asian 'green pit vipers'; American *Micrurus*). This may result in antivenoms that offer broad protection against venoms from minor species within genera, or species whose bites are less frequent than those of others in the same taxonomic groups (i.e.: Genus, Sub-Family or Family).

5.2.3 Sea snake venoms

Although venomous marine sea snakes have not been included in the tables of

medically

important snakes from each region/country, it is important to recognise that there are a number of species of marine snakes with potent venoms that can cause illness or death. Available evidence, particularly clinical experience, indicates that the current major sea snake antivenom commercially available, which uses venom of a single sea snake, *Enhydrina schistosa*, plus a terrestrial Elapid, *Notechis scutatus*, in the immunising venoms mixture, is effective against envenomings by other sea snakes for which there are clinical data. Further research would be needed to better define the full extent of para specific protection offered by this antivenom against other sea snake species.

5.3 Taxonomy of venomous snakes

Recognising the species causing the greatest public health burden, designing and manufacturing antivenoms and optimising patient treatment are all critically dependant on a correct understanding of the taxonomy of venomous snakes. Like other sciences, the field of taxonomy is constantly developing. New species are still being discovered regularly, and many formerly recognised widespread species have been found to comprise multiple separate species as scientists obtain better information, often with new technologies. As the understanding of the relationships among species is still developing, the classification of species into genera is also subject to change. The listings of venomous species used in this guideline follow the current taxonomic nomenclature at the time of writing (July, 2008). Some groups of venomous snakes remain understudied and poorly known. In those cases, the classification best supported by what evidence exists is presented with the limitation that new studies may result in new nomenclatural changes.

Clinicians, toxinologists, venom producers and antivenom manufacturers have therefore an absolute responsibility to remain abreast of these nomenclatural changes. These often reflect improved knowledge of the homogeneity of snake populations, and may have implications for venom producers, researchers and antivenom manufacturers. Although taxonomic changes do not necessarily indicate the presence of "new" venoms, they strongly suggest that toxinological and epidemiological research into these "new" taxa may be required to establish their medical relevance, if any.

Since some of the names of medically important species have changed in recent years, the following points are intended to allow readers to relate the current nomenclature to former literature information:

- The large group of Asian pit vipers that for many years were referred to a single genus (*Trimeresurus*), have been split into a number of new genera (e.g. *Cryptelytrops*, *Parias*, *Peltopelorus*, *Himalayophis*, *Popeia*, *Viridovipera*, *Ovophis*, *Protobothrops*, with a few species retained in *Trimeresurus*) based on current views of the inter-relationships between these groups.

There are divergent views on this approach to the taxonomy of these snakes, and interested parties should consult the literature. Medically important species formerly classified in *Trimeresurus* include *Cryptelytrops albolabris*, *C. erythrurus*, *C. insularis*, *Protobothrops flavoviridis*, *P. mucrosquamatus* and *Viridovipera stejnegeri*.

- It is likely that new species of cobra (*Naja* spp.) will be identified within existing taxa in both Africa and Asia; three new species (*N. ashei*, *N. mandalayensis* and *N. nubiae*) have

been described and several subspecies elevated to specific status since 2000 (*Naja annulifera* and *N. anchietae*, from being subspecies of *N. haje*), in addition to the recent synonymisation of *Boulengerina* and *Paranaja* within *Naja*. Such changes may hold significance for antivenom manufacturers and should stimulate further research to test whether existing antivenoms cover all target snake populations.

- Several medically important vipers have been reclassified: *Daboia siamensis* has been recognised as a separate species from *Daboia russelii*; *Macrovipera mauritanica* and *M. deserti* have been transferred to *Daboia*, the Central American rattlesnakes formerly classified with *Crotalus durissus* are now *Crotalus simus*, and *Bothrops neuwiedi* has been found to consist of a number of different species, three of which (*B. neuwiedi*, *B. diporus*, *B. matogrossensis*) may be of public health importance.

5.4 Main recommendations

- Identification of the medically important venomous snakes (those that cause the greatest burden of injury, disability and/or mortality) is a critical pre-requisite to meeting the need for efficacious antivenom.
- Improving the quality of the available data, correcting and amplifying the level of geographic detail and precision of attribution should be an important priority.
- Clinicians, toxinologists, poison centers, regulators, venom producers and antivenom manufacturers should be well-informed of current nomenclature and new taxonomy changes, so as to ensure the currency of information, correct identification of species in their countries, and correct selection and sourcing of venoms used in the manufacture of antivenoms. Potentially transient and sometimes conflicting nature of taxonomic nomenclature may occur.

6 ANTIVENOMS DESIGN: SELECTION OF SNAKE VENOMS

An accurate selection of snake venoms is critical for the production of antivenoms that have the capacity to cover the majority of cases of envenoming in a given geographical region, territory or country. The composition of snake venoms is very complex and a high inter- and intra-species variation has been documented. Therefore, in contrast with other animal-derived immunoglobulins (e.g. tetanus or rabies immunoglobulins), the design of the antigenic mixture to be used in antivenom manufacture is a critical and delicate task that should be carefully considered.

The selection of the most appropriate snake venoms for the production of antivenoms needs to be carefully analyzed and should take into consideration:

1. The geographical region where the antivenom is going to be used.
2. The medically most relevant snakes from the geographical region where the antivenom is going to be used.
3. The variability of venom composition within the region of distribution of a snake species.
4. The information on paraspecific protection of antivenoms against the venoms of species not included in the mixture of venoms used to immunize animals for antivenom manufacture.

6.1 Selection and preparation of representative venom mixtures

The information provided in the Appendix presents an updated list of the most relevant species of snakes, from a medical standpoint, in the various regions and countries of

the world.

Manufacturers should consider, as a priority, the venoms of species included in the category 1 of this Appendix for the design of venom mixtures for immunization. Venoms to include in a venom pool used for animal immunization should be selected on the basis of the geographical region where an antivenom is intended to be distributed. On a case by case basis, venoms from species listed in category 2 of the Appendix could be included in an immunizing mixture.

There are variations in venom composition and antigenicity within the geographical range of a single taxonomic species as well as other causes of intra-species variation (such as changes according to the age of the specimens) (Warrell, 1997; Fry et al., 2003). Therefore, pooled representative samples of venoms should be prepared from snakes of different geographical origins and ages (see Section 7 on venom preparation). Paraspecific neutralization of venoms outside the range of venoms used for immunization may extend the range of therapeutic applications of some antivenoms. Results of preclinical potency testing may be used to identify a potential crossed-neutralization capacity of antivenoms, which should subsequently be confirmed by clinical testing in envenomed patients. *In vitro* immunological cross-reactivity should not be used as the single basis for recommending therapeutic use of an antivenom outside the range of venoms used in its production.

6.2 Manufacture of monospecific or polyspecific antivenoms

A major issue in designing antivenoms is to define whether they should have monospecific or polyspecific activity.

6.2.1 Monospecific antivenoms

Monospecific antivenoms are limited in use to a single species of venomous snake or to a few closely related species whose venoms show clinically effective cross-neutralisation with such monospecific antivenoms. These conditions apply in areas where:

1. there is only one medically important species (e.g. *Vipera berus* in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia),
2. a simple blood test, amenable for use even in peripheral health care centres, can define the biting species (e.g. detection of incoagulable blood by the 20 minute whole blood clotting test in the northern third of Africa where only *Echis* spp. cause coagulopathy),
3. a simple algorithmic approach allows the species to be inferred from the pattern of clinical features,
4. there is reliable and affordable rapid immunodiagnostic test readily available allowing to identify the toxins unambiguously

However, most countries are inhabited by several medically important species of snakes, where there may be no distinctive clinical syndrome to direct the use of a monospecific antivenom. In these cases, the manufacture of polyspecific antivenoms should be highly recommended.

6.2.2 Polyspecific antivenoms

Some clinicians are prejudiced against using polyspecific antivenoms, by fear of

inherently lower potency than monospecific antivenoms. This is not necessarily the case. Polyspecific antivenoms may be obtained in two ways:

- They can be generated by immunizing animals with a mixture of venoms from various snake species. The resulting antivenom will then contain antibodies against venom components of various snake species. When a polyspecific antivenom is produced this way, by immunizing an animal with venoms from several taxonomically-related snakes (e.g. different vipers), the titre of neutralising antibodies against individual venoms may be higher than in a monospecific antivenom produced by immunizing an animal with only a single venom (Raweerith and Ratanabanangkoon, 2005). However, this synergistic immune response may not occur when the venoms are from taxonomically unrelated snakes (e.g. an elapid and a viper)

- Another approach is to combine antivenoms in a single product either by (a) immunizing individual animals with the venom of a single species and then mixing the various hyperimmune plasmas for fractionation, or (b) mixing in appropriate quantity the respective purified antivenoms before formulation. Proceeding this way may facilitate the adjustment of the respective potencies of the various antivenom specificities in the mixture. However, in such "combined antivenoms", neutralising antibodies against all individual venoms will be proportionally diluted. Such dilution implies that higher antivenom dose would have to be infused to patients, likely increasing the risks of adverse reactions.

In some regions, it is possible to differentiate envenomings based on obvious distinct clinical effects: neurotoxicity, local tissue damage and/or haematological disturbances (hemorrhage or coagulopathy). Such situations justify the preparation of separate polyspecific antivenoms against mixtures of either neurotoxic venoms or venoms inflicting tissue damage, haemorrhage and/or coagulopathy.

In general, the production of one polyspecific antivenom is simpler and less expensive than that of several different monospecific antivenoms. Polyspecific antivenoms have the additional advantage of simplicity of distribution and supply to different parts of a country. Clinical indications for their use are more straightforward since identification of the responsible snake species is less important. They can be produced using venoms from a range of species of venomous snakes of high medical relevance, broadening their usefulness and making identification of the biting species less critical. Polyspecific antivenoms resulting from the immunization of animals by a mixture of venoms offer significant clinical advantages and their production should be encouraged, whenever technically possible.

6.3 Main recommendations

- When selecting antivenoms to use in their countries, National Health Authorities should first obtain and consider the information on the local snake species and their relative medical importance.**
- The design of the venom mixture used in immunization, and the decision to prepare monospecific or polyspecific antivenoms depend on the epidemiological and clinical information on snakebites in that particular country or region. In general, polyspecific antivenoms are more convenient to use than monospecific antivenoms and simplify the selection of product for the treatment of envenomings.**

- **The preparation of polyspecific antivenoms obtained by immunizing animals with a mixture of venoms is preferred, when possible, to the mixture of individual monospecific antivenoms**
- **Manufacturers seeking marketing authorization of antivenoms in a given country should provide experimental evidence from preclinical testing that the product exhibits a neutralization capacity of local venoms (see Section 17).**

7 SNAKE VENOMS PREPARATION AND STORAGE

Venom preparations are used both to hyper-immunize animals, as part of antivenom production, and to provide reference venom samples for routine and/or preclinical potency assessment of antivenoms. Ensuring their quality is therefore of critical importance, and their preparation should follow the GMP recommendations that are mentioned below.

Venoms used for antivenom manufacture should be representative of the snake population living in the area where the antivenom is used. In order to take account of the variability in venom composition of an individual species (Saravia et al., 2002; Faure and Bon, 1987; Creer et al., 2003), it is imperative that the venom of an adequate number of snakes (generally not less than 20 to 50 specimens) from the same geographical location should be collected together. A similar preparation can be used as a national standard of venoms for routine potency assessment of antivenoms (see Section 8) and to perform preclinical testing of antivenoms (see Section 17) to verify that the antivenom is designed to treat envenomings in the region efficiently. Venom producers should follow rigorously the recommendations listed below and provide evidence of compliance on:

- Geographical origin and size (and hence the approximate age) of each individual snake used for venom production,
- Taxonomic details of each snake used,
- Correct implementation of CITES documents in the case of endangered species,
- Precautionary measures to avoid collection of venoms from sick snakes,
- Individual identification of snakes contributing to each venom batch, and
- Traceability of each venom batch.

Being able to fulfil the following recommendations is also strongly recommended:

- Rapid freezing of the venom after collection,
- Lyophilization of the venom during storage,¹ and
- Confirmation of batch-to-batch similarity of venom of the same origin.

¹ Dessication may be acceptable if proven to ensure stability of the preparation

7.1 Preparation of snake venoms for immunization

The maintenance of a snake farm and the handling of snakes used for antivenom production should comply with GMP principles.

7.1.1 Quarantine of snakes

All new accessions should be quarantined for at least two months in a special room ("quarantine room") which should be located as far as possible from the "production rooms" where snakes qualified for milking are kept.

On arrival, snakes should be examined by a specialized veterinary surgeon (or

experienced person) for ectoparasites and pentastomids, that should be eliminated using broad-spectrum antiparasitic drugs, as well as possible infections, in particular transmissible infections (Reichenbach-Klinke and Elkan 1965; Cooper and Jackson 1981; Frye 1991). Some viruses can be transmitted between different species (for example from *Bothrops* spp. to *Crotalus* spp.).

When handling snakes, the risk of infection with human mosquito-borne viruses such as Japanese encephalitis should be prevented, since arbovirus infections in some snakes has been reported (Shortridge et al., 1974).

Sick snakes should be treated and their quarantine extended for two months after complete clinical recovery. Sick animals found in "production rooms" may be treated *in situ* but they cannot be milked for venom production. If an antibiotic treatment is given, the snake should not be milked for four weeks following the end of the treatment. When housed in good conditions, adult snakes collected in nature can live in a snake farm for 10 years or more.

7.1.2 Maintenance of captive snakes for venom production

Ideally, a single species should be kept in each room to avoid mixing up with different venoms. Individual snakes should preferably be housed in separate cages large enough to allow them to move about. There are several acceptable options for the design of the cages. Transparent or black (for burrowing snakes) plastic boxes are recommended. Cage materials should be impermeable, free from fissures, and inert to disinfectants, cleaning chemicals and common solvents. Cages should be adequately ventilated but perforations or mesh should be small enough to prevent escape. In the case of gravid female vipers, the mesh should be sufficiently fine to prevent escape of their tiny, live-borne babies. The cage interior should be visible from the outside to allow safe maintenance and handling. Access to cages through doors, lids or sliding panels should facilitate management without sacrificing safety or allowing snakes to escape. Disposable floor covering (e.g. newspaper) is recommended. Cryptic and nocturnal species, should be provided with a small shelter where they can hide.

The use of "hide boxes" is increasingly common as these provide both a more reassuring environment for the snake, and increased safety for keepers. Hide boxes should be designed to be slightly larger than the curled snake, with a single small entrance/exit hole, large enough to allow a recently fed snake easy access, plus some simple closure device to lock the snake in the hide box. This will allow removal of the snake from the cage, without hazard to the keeper, making routine cage maintenance simpler and safer. Hide boxes can be plastic or wooden, but should be readily cleanable. The roof of the hide box should be removable, to allow easy, safe extraction of the snake, when required.

Cages should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected, ideally when soiled (e.g. almost daily for elapids), but at least every week. Faeces and uneaten or regurgitated rodents should be removed.

To avoid misidentification of the snake, a label bearing its individual data should be attached to the cage and transferred with the snake when it is moved to another cage. Water should be provided at least two days per week but for species from humid climates, more frequent watering or misting may be required, particularly when sloughing. Water should be changed regularly and as soon as it becomes

contaminated. Water treatment by UV sterilization or acidification may be considered. Tens of cages may be accommodated in the same "production room", provided that there is enough space for maintenance and milking. This room should be kept as clean as possible and carefully cleaned at least each week. Access should be guarded by a tray containing an antiseptic which is placed on the floor at the entrance so that the footwear of all people entering is automatically treated. The temperature and humidity of the snake room should be controlled according to the climatic requirements of the particular snake species. Ventilation should be ensured using fans, air conditioning, or air renewing systems.

Access to snake rooms should be restricted to personnel responsible for their maintenance. They should be kept locked, with any windows permanently closed or protected by bars and mosquito proofing. Access should be via a safety porch not allowing simultaneous door opening and with a transparent panel allowing a view of the entire snake room to check whether any animals have escaped from their cages. The spaces below the doors should be less than 3 mm and all openings to the exterior (water pipes, drainage conduits, ventilation entrances and exits etc.) should be protected by grills having holes smaller than 5 mm. Natural light is often used, however, when not available, artificial light should be turned on for 12 hours during the day and turned off during the night. Snakes of the same species, collected at the same time in the same area should be placed in the same racks. The same "production room" can contain snakes of different species, providing that they have similar living requirements (temperature, humidity).

Under favourable housing and climatic conditions and if left undisturbed, snakes will reproduce in captivity (Gans and Gans, 1984). Animals should be mated only with specimens from the same species, subspecies and local origin (Mitchell, 2004; Chanhome et al., 2001). Sexing can be difficult but is helped by the use of intra-cloacal probes. Male and female should be individually identified and separated soon after copulation. The female should be kept under careful surveillance. Eggs from oviparous snakes and newborns from ovoviviparous snakes should be removed from their mother's cage as soon as possible. When difference in the venom composition of adult and juvenile snakes had been reported, as in the case of *Bothrops* and *Crotalus* species (Gutiérrez et al., 1980; Furtado et al., 1991; Saravia et al., 2002; Alape-Girón et al., 2008), the venom of a certain proportion of juvenile snakes might be mixed with that of adults.

The ideal frequency of feeding captive snakes depends on the species and age, varying from twice per week to once per month. Snakes are usually fed after being milked, ideally with dead mice or other appropriate prey according to the snake species. Some snakes will only accept living prey but attempts should be made to wean them onto dead prey. Snake-eating species, such as kraits, coral snakes and king cobras, can be enticed to take dead mice if the prey is first flavoured with snake tissue fluids or even snake faeces. Living, dead or regurgitated prey should not be left in the cage for more than a few hours. Force-feeding may be necessary for neonates and snakes that persistently refuse to feed. Feeding time affords an opportunity to carefully check the snake for abnormal behaviour, wounds, and possible infections and to give dietary supplements when necessary. Individual feeding records are crucial. They should