

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Terminal burrowing behaviour – a phenomenon of lethal hypothermia

Dear Sirs,

We were interested to read the paper by Rothschild and Schneider [1], in which they suggest that “terminal burrowing behaviour” has not previously been described in the literature.

The phenomenon the authors are describing is well-recognised by British forensic pathologists, who know it

as the “hide and die syndrome”. A description of this behaviour can be found in Professor Bernard Knight’s comprehensive textbook “*Forensic Pathology*” [2].

References

1. Rothschild MA, Schneider V (1995) “Terminal burrowing behaviour” – a phenomenon of lethal hypothermia. *Int J Legal Med* 107:250–256
2. Knight B (1991) *Forensic pathology*. Edward Arnold, London Melbourne Auckland

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Reply

Dear Sirs,

Thank you very much for your letter, in which you made a critical observation concerning our article on “terminal burrowing behaviour”. In the German forensic medical literature there are in fact no references to this variety of the so-called paradox reaction. In the chapter quoted by

you, B. Knight uses the term “hide-and-die syndrome” to describe the phenomenon referred to as terminal burrowing behaviour by us. However, he apparently attributes this exclusively to elderly people dying of hypothermia (“... In some old people, hypothermia may be linked with a strange psychiatric condition, in which they hide themselves ...”). We, on the other hand, have observed this phenomenon in adults of all age groups without any significant differences, insofar as it was possible to determine this considering the relatively small number of cases involved. Without doubt, the term hide-and-die syndrome is better, rhetorically speaking, than our expression terminal burrowing behaviour.

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