

Letter to the Editor

Dear *Cutis*[®]:

The Cohen¹ article, “Harpist’s Finger: Case Report of a Trauma-Induced Blister in a Beginner Harpist and Review of String Instrument–Associated Skin Problems in Musicians” (*Cutis*. 2008;82:329-334), described harpist’s finger and reviewed other string instrument–associated dermatoses. The table in the article includes the dermatosis cellist’s scrotum.¹ The editor, author, and readers of this article should be advised that subsequent to publication, cellist’s scrotum was revealed to have been a hoax by the author who originally reported it.^{2,3}

Sincerely,
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The author reports no conflict of interest.

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Author Response

A confabulator confesses: cellist’s scrotum is a hoax! After 34 years, Mr. John M. Murphy (a nondoctor and chairman of the St. Peter’s Brewery in Suffolk) and his wife Elaine Murphy (a physician and member of the House of Lords in London) confess that they “invented cello scrotum.”¹ The confession of the “Murphy’s lore” was initially posted as a rapid response² to an article by Bache and Edenborough.³ It was subsequently published as a letter.¹

Murphy’s⁴ fabrication of cellist’s scrotum was published in the May 1974 issue of the *British Medical Journal*. The letter discussed a patient—now realized to be imaginary—who “was a professional musician and played in rehearsal, practice, or concert for several hours each day” resulting in “a case of cello scrotum caused by the irritation of the body of the cello.”⁴ Murphy and Murphy¹ mentioned that their invention of cellist’s scrotum was prompted

by Curtis⁵ description of guitar nipple, a unilateral traumatic mastitis involving the breast on the side of the dominant hand in young female guitar players caused by the edge of their classical guitar’s sound box being pressed against the nipple. Murphy and Murphy¹ also stated that they “thought it highly likely to be a spoof and decided to go one further by submitting a letter pretending to have noted a similar phenomenon in cellists.”

Subsequently, it has been noted that the appropriate playing position of the classical guitar in females did not correlate with Curtis’ observations,^{6,7} which has prompted authors to either criticize the “faulty instruction in positioning the instrument,”⁶ recommend alternative placement of the guitar while playing,⁸ or challenge the accuracy (and possible validity)⁷ of Curtis’⁵ description of guitar nipple. To date, the *British Medical Journal* has “not yet been able to verify whether . . . the letter describing guitar nipple . . . was also a hoax.”⁹

Several reviews on the dermatologic problems of musicians have acknowledged cellist’s scrotum.^{3,10-13} However, within the same year, Scheuer¹⁴ questioned if Murphy’s⁴ patient held the cello in an “unorthodox way” and also commented that “personal observation suggests that the body of a cello is normally separated from the scrotum by several centimeters.” Subsequently, in 1991, Shapiro¹⁵—a former professional cellist—also questioned “the accuracy of the information under the designation of cello scrotum.” He commented, “When the cello is held in typical playing position, the body of the instrument is not near the scrotum. Contact of the body of the cello with the scrotum would require an extremely awkward playing position, which I have never seen a playing cellist assume.”¹⁵ Other investigators also have been uncertain about the validity of this nonexistent condition in cellists.^{11,12} Indeed, even the Murphys concur that “[a]nyone who has ever watched a cello being played would realise [sic] the physical impossibility of our claim.”¹

The Murphys offer neither apology nor remorse for their actions. Indeed, they comment that “[w]e have been dining out on this story ever since [its publication in 1974]. We were thrilled once more to be quoted in ‘A symphony of maladies.’”¹ Although the reader may find the subject matter

and associated circumstances of this cutaneous confabulation to be entertaining, the intentional introduction of false information into the medical literature is a serious issue. The editors and Editorial Board of *Cutis* should be commended for permitting clarification of this hoax and discussion of the subsequent literature generated regarding cellist's scrotum, thereby encouraging future authors to maintain high standards of integrity with respect to the accuracy and content of the papers they submit to be considered for publication.

Sincerely,
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The author reports no conflict of interest.

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