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ISSN 0256-9574 Website: www.hmpg.co.za Journal: www.samj.org.za



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Pterois miles is variously known as the Devilfish, Firefish or Lionfish — all apt names considering that its dorsal spines can inject an agonisingly painful toxin. It is fearless in its behaviour, swimming conspicuously over reefs when it is not sheltering under overhangs. When approached, it erects its fins and lunges with its dorsal spines. The most effective treatment is to immerse the wound in water that is as hot as can be tolerated, to denature the toxin. A close relative is the deadly stonefish Synanceia verrucosa, the world's most venomous fish, capable of causing death in less than an hour. An antivenin is available in Australia, but immediate and sustained immersion in searing hot water is often more practical. The famous South African ichthyologist JLB Smith saved his own life this way after envenomation by a stonefish.

Photo and text: George Branch Email: mbranch@mweb.co.za

#### Contents listed in

Index Medicus (Medline). Excerpta Medica (EMBASE). Biological Abstracts (BIOSIS). Science Citation Index (SciSearch).

Current Contents/Clinical Medicine

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### Subscription rates

#### Local subscriptions R1 032.00 p.a.

Foreign subscriptions R2 328.00 p.a. Single copies R90.00

Members of the Association receive the *SAMJ* only on request, as part of their membership benefit.

Subscriptions: Tel. (012) 481-2071 E-mail: members@samedical.org

The SAMJ is published

monthly by the Health and Medical Publishing Group (Pty) Ltd, Co. registration 2004/0220 32/07, a subsidiary of SAMA.

28 Main Road (Cnr Devonshire Hill Road), Rondebosch, 7700

> Tel. (021) 681-7200. Fax (021) 685-1395. E-mail: publishing@hmpg.co.za Website: www.samedical.org

Please submit all letters and articles for publication online at www.samj.org.za

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