The number of women dying as a result of spinal anaesthesia during caesarean section in South Africa is steadily increasing in the triennial reports of the National Committee on Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths (NCCEMD). This article postulates some of the reasons behind this phenomenon. The concern is raised that spinal anaesthesia is being undertaken inappropriately by poorly trained practitioners. A case is made for the rigorous application of known safety standards and for doctors to be solely responsible for the care of the mother during caesarean section. The need for doctors to be trained and prepared to administer general anaesthesia when required is noted.


Fig. 1. Maternal deaths assessed to be directly due to anaesthesia (1999 - 2010). Taken from Pattinson et al.¹
In all these cases, the assessors could clearly identify abandonment. The numerous cases where documentation is too inadequate to reveal this problem are not included, and the real magnitude of abandonment in SA may be far higher. No hospital providing an operative obstetric service should place physicians in a situation where this is even considered as an option. Units that cannot provide adequate numbers of appropriately trained staff to avoid this practice should refer their operative obstetrics cases to the nearest available unit that can do so.

Conclusion
The provision of safe anaesthetic services at district-level hospitals must be made a healthcare priority. It is the responsibility of medical managers and hospital chief executive officers to ensure that their staff possess adequate training and skills in both general and spinal anaesthesia. Although performance management contracts place considerable pressure on management to deliver in certain key areas, the threat posed by inadequately trained anaesthetists is sufficiently grave to justify this requirement.

All pregnant patients deserve a high standard of anaesthesia in every facility. The basic minimum standards of obstetric anaesthesia practice are:
1. An appropriately equipped operating theatre with all equipment and disposable items checked and in functioning order, as though the patient was receiving general anaesthesia (NCCEMD 2005 - 2007 equipment list).
2. Full pre-anaesthetic examination by the doctor providing anaesthesia, including an airway assessment.
3. Administration of 0.3 M sodium citrate (30 ml) 0 - 30 minutes before the induction of anaesthesia.
4. Provision of anaesthesia appropriate to the patient and her clinical condition (although in most cases this will be spinal anaesthesia at a district hospital, provision must be made for safe general anaesthesia).
5. The use of an obstetric wedge to provide appropriate lateral tilt of the gravid uterus in all cases.
6. A doctor who has the exclusive responsibility of monitoring and stabilising the patient during anaesthesia (of whatever variety) and who must not be given the additional tasks of assisting the surgery or resuscitating the baby.

References