This intensely itchy lesion appeared on a 65 year old patient’s toe, six days after spending a week on the golden beaches of neighbouring Mozambique. What may be the cause?

**Answer**

**Tunga penetrans** (sand flea infestation) is the likely cause. These tiny blood-sucking fleas complete their life cycle in loose dry sand. The gravid females attach to the skin of any mammal, but prefer humans or pigs. There it will dig through the skin with only the distal part of the abdomen protruding through the entry hole through which eggs are deposited. The maggots hatch into larvae that live on organic material before evolving into a pupa, which turns into an adult flea. After copulation, adult females start looking for the next host. In barefoot walkers most lesions are found between the toes or next to nails where the skin is softer. Adult females die naturally after a period of about three weeks. Often the culprits can be dug out with a sharp object. Locally applied insecticide may be another option. Provided the infestation is not too extensive, with more South Africans visiting tropical destinations, other possibilities will have to be considered as well.

**Unlikely causes:**

- **Ingrowing toe nail (septic paronychium)?** Big toe usually affected.
- **Acute gout?** Not likely at age 65 for a first attack, and also more likely to affect the big toe.
- **Trauma?** The patient would most likely be aware of it.
- **Larva migrans (creeping eruption)?** More likely, but wrong again. Because dogs are not forbidden from beaches, canine hookworm larvae from dog excreta are often found in the sand. As the name creeping eruption implies, one would expect an inflamed red track of the larva, instead of a single round lesion as seen here. (See picture)
- **Tunga penetrans** (sand flea infestation) is the likely cause.

**Photo:** courtesy of Prof WK Jacyk, UP.