

When someone is executed by lethal injection, do they swab off the arm first?

A Straight Dope Classic from Cecil's Storehouse of Human Knowledge

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Dear Cecil:

I have a question. When a prisoner is put to death by lethal injection, does he or she still get their arm cleaned with an alcohol swab?

— Mark Alonso, 101st Airborne Division

Cecil replies:

Does make you wonder. Here they are, about to execute the guy, and they're worried he might get infected with germs?

However, according to a spokesman for the Texas Department of Corrections, which has carried out many executions by lethal injection, the technician (it's never a doctor) is in fact supposed to swab the prisoner's arm first. One presumes other states employing this method do likewise.

There are several reasons for this. Apart from its usefulness as an antiseptic, alcohol causes blood vessels to rise to the surface, making it easier to insert the needle. More important, there's a chance the prisoner's sentence might be delayed or commuted at the last minute.

It's happened before. In October, 1983 condemned murderer James Autry was strapped to a gurney for an hour in a Texas prison with saline solution dripping into his arm. (He was awake the whole time, incidentally.) At about the time he was scheduled to die he was told he'd received a stay of execution. He was returned to his cell and not executed until the following March. Whatever you think of the death penalty, you wouldn't want the guy to die of sheer carelessness.

Which brings us to what I think is the real reason for swabbing the arm — it allows the executioners to think of themselves as professionals doing a job rather than killers.

Interviews with members of execution teams reveal that they place great stock in following proper procedures. We can be sure that if the prisoner were to choke on a chicken bone during his last meal, the authorities would spare no effort to save his life an hour before ending it. Indeed, if you can believe Chuck Shepherd's *News of the Weird* column, that's already happened. "In Texas convicted murderer David Lee Herman slashed his throat on April 1 [1997], a day before his execution, but was patched up and given his lethal injection one day late," Shepherd writes. Nazi death camp guards observed no such niceties. We're better, because we do.

— Cecil Adams