Homicide by smothering masqueraded as Accidental Electrocution

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ABSTRACT

Homicide, i.e., killing of a human being by another is a heinous crime. The perpetrators are now adopting various scientific means to conceal their crimes and destroying the evidences to escape from conviction. Here, a case of accidental electrocution was brought by police for medicolegal postmortem examination. But after conducting meticulous autopsy and visiting the scene of crime, the case turned out to be homicide by smothering. This highlights the importance of careful and meticulous autopsy and crime scene visit for determination of cause and manner of death.

Keywords: Electrocution, Homicide, Meticulous examination, Smothering.

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CASE REPORT

A 27-year-old married female was brought dead at casualty of Pravara Rural Hospital, Loni, Maharashtra, India, on July 30, 2016, with alleged history of electrocution. Body was sent for medicolegal autopsy to know the exact cause of death. On external examination, rigor mortis was well marked all over the body, lividity was fixed, petechial hemorrhages were present over both conjunctiva, and marked cyanosis was present over the lips, tip of tongue, and nails of both hands.

Injuries over the Lips and Mouth

- Crescent-shaped nail-scratch abrasion present just over upper lip midpart, of size 1.5 cm (Fig. 1).
- Bruising present over lining of lips, cheeks, and soft tissues of teeth and jaws (Fig. 2).
- Contusion present just below left angle of mouth, of size 1 cm in diameter.
- Contusion presents just below lower lip midpart, of size 2 cm in diameter.

Other Injuries

- Contusion seen over right elbow medial aspect, 2.2 × 1 cm transverse.
- Contusion seen over right arm lower part medial aspect, 2.2 × 1 cm vertical.
- Entry wound of electrocution, two in number seen over right index finger, palmar aspect midpart between 1st and 2nd nodes of size 3 × 2.2 cm and...
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between 2nd and 3rd nodes of size 3 × 2.4 cm adjacent to one another, associated with charring and yellowing of skin. However, no ecchymoses or effusion of blood was seen on cut section (Fig. 3).

Injury nos. 1 to 6 were reddish colored and antemortem in nature. However, no sign of vital reactions and hyperemia surrounding injury was seen in injury no. 7, so tissue was preserved for histopathological examination to rule out its nature.

On internal examination, petechial hemorrhages were present over brain; trachea and lungs were congested; and on squeezing cut section, exude copious frothy fluid was oozing out of both lungs. No abnormal smell was present in stomach; however, routine viscera was preserved in saturated salt solution for chemical analysis. Uterus was enlarged in size, with weight 950 gm (Fig. 4). On giving T-shaped incision, a male fetus was seen surrounded by amniotic fluid having weight 230 gm, length 22 cm, head circumference 14.5 cm, and chest circumference 12 cm (Fig. 5).

Cause of death was given as “death due to smothering associated with electrocution.”

DISCUSSION

“Suffocation” is a general term used to indicate death from deprivation of oxygen, either from lack of gas in the breathable environment or from obstruction of the air-passages at the level of the nose and mouth. Smothering is a form of asphyxia caused by closure of the external respiratory orifices either by hands or by other means, or by blocking up the cavities of the nose and mouth by introduction of a foreign substance, such as mud, paper, cloth. Smothering is also used synonymously with suffocation by some authors.3 Suffocation deaths apparently looks simple, but is one of the most complex causes of deaths. Sometimes it becomes a challenge for the autopsy surgeon to distinguish between accident, suicide, and homicide because in many situations there is no specific finding supporting the manner of death, which mostly relies on circumstantial evidences and proper history of the case.
Deaths due to smothering are either homicidal or suicidal, and very rarely accidental. The most common form of suicidal smothering is by placing a plastic bag over an individual’s head. In homicidal smothering, the implements used are usually pillows, bedding, and the hands. Infants may be placed in plastic bags. When smothering is accomplished by the hands, the nose is pinched off with one hand while the other hand is used to push the jaw closed. In small children, one hand is sufficient to accomplish both the tasks. In infants and adults unable to put up any effective resistance, an autopsy will fail to disclose any injury due to this process. In adults, even those who can muster a minimal struggle, there may be abrasions over the nose or chin from the fingernails and contusion over the lips due to pressure of the palm. The sequence of physiological events in smothering is:

- bradycardia;
- decrease in respiration to agonal gasps with eventual cessation of respiration; and
- slowing and finally flattening of the electroencephalogram.\(^\text{5}\)

In the present case, crescent-shaped nail-scratch abrasion and contusions over the lips along with signs of asphyxia are purely indicative of homicide by smothering. Electrocution means deaths caused due to passage of electric current through the body. Virtually, all cases of electrical fatalities are accidental in nature, while homicides and suicides are extremely rare.\(^\text{6-8}\)

Most of the deaths occur due to low-voltage current used in houses and minor industrial settings. One of the significant signs seen on the body of an electrocuted person is the presence of an electric mark or Joule burn at the site of entry of electric current. Electrical burns have a characteristic appearance and pathological findings. There is streaming of the epidermal nuclei at the point of contact with the current microscopic blisters of the epidermis.\(^\text{9,10}\) In the present case, significant findings were more of smothering than electrocution. The electrical injuries were only produced to conceal the homicidal act.

In present-day society, with the aid of advanced knowledge and information acquired through media, cinema, and the Internet, the criminals are now adopting various scientific means to conceal their crimes and destroying the evidences to escape from conviction. Different methods are used by the assailants to conceal the crime so that there may be wrong interpretation by the autopsy surgeon which will eventually lead to miscarriage of justice. In our case, electrical injuries were produced on the body of the victim to hide the criminal act and simulate an accidental manner.\(^\text{4}\) In such instances, careful autopsy as well as crime scene visit is necessary for proper diagnosis of the cause and manner of death. As we visited the crime scene, we found a wire in the bedroom connected to the power circuit was being deliberately cut for giving electric shock to the victim. It was then adhered with a back tape to avoid being noticed (Fig. 6).

**CONCLUSION**

“The dead body is extremely eloquent and honestly informative, if one exercises patience in listening to it.” This saying is perfectly proved in our case. Framing correctly the cause and manner of death is a challenge for an autopsy surgeon particularly in case of homicide where the crime has been concealed by the perpetrators. So with careful and meticulous examination of the dead body along with crime scene visit, and with knowledge of common methods of concealment of crime, can lead to a definite conclusion and help the investigating agencies for the administration of justice.
REFERENCES