

Case Report

Filicide-Parasuicide: A Case Report and ‘Insight’

N.C. Shreedhar¹, B.Viswakanth^{2*}, S.N. Roopak³ and P. Shruthi³

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, Srinivas Institute of Medical Sciences and Research Centre, Mangalore, Karnataka, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, P.K Das Institute of Medical Sciences, Vaniamkulam, Kerala, India

³Post Graduate Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, Kempegowda Institute of Medical Sciences, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

*Corresponding author email id: drviswakanth@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Filicide is a tragic crime of murdering one’s own child. This article describes a case of murder followed by suicide attempt by the mother. Examining this type of offender may help us better understand the group who complete murder followed by suicide. Present case is being reported with an attempt to evaluate the episode so that preventive measures could be adopted. Previous research has found that the offending parents are commonly depressed and that suicide is often associated as an actual act or an intention.

Keywords: Filicide, Suicide, Depressive disorder forensic psychiatry, Familicide, Postmortem, Infanticide

INTRODUCTION

Homicide-suicide is defined as a violent event in which an individual commits homicide and subsequently commits suicide within a few hours^[1]. Homicide-parasuicide is defined as the successful homicide of an individual, followed by an unsuccessful suicide attempt^[2]. Filicide is the killing of a child by its parents^[3]; it can be committed by both men and women, though far less literature exists on paternal filicide than maternal filicide. Specific motives for filicide are classified as (1) altruistic, (2) acutely psychotic, (3) accidental (fatal maltreatment), (4) unwanted child and (5) spouse revenge. Altruistic filicide is the most common motive^[4] where the murder is committed out of love to relieve the real or imagined suffering of the child. For example, a mother who is suicidal may not be willing to leave her child motherless in a cruel world. Furthermore, filicide may occur within the context of familicide, the extermination of the entire family.

Intentional self-killing in the form of attempted and

successful suicide is on the rise globally in the recent decades. In the last four decades, suicide rates have been increasing and currently it is one of the three leading cause of death among the age group of 15-44 years (in both sexes). Suicide attempts are up to 20 times more frequent than completed suicide⁵ and presents as one of the serious social and public health problems. Its prevention is still a challenging job to the public health authorities and other health care providers. Suicidal rate in India is 11.4% 100,000 populations as per the National Crime Record Bureau of India^[6].

CASE DESCRIPTION

A dead body of an 8 year old female child was brought for medicolegal autopsy to the department of forensic medicine, KIMS Bangalore with a history that she was killed by her mother by covering a plastic bag over her head and face and tying the bag with cloth piece around the neck. Following which she attempted to commit suicide by hanging, but was unsuccessful, as she was saved by a relative.

POST-MORTEM FINDINGS

On external examination she measured 126 cm in length, built and nourishment were moderate. Rigor mortis was present throughout the body. Post-mortem lividity was present over the back of the body and fixed. Head was covered by a plastic bag; on removal of plastic bag a transverse, faint ligature mark was present over front and both sides of neck above the level of thyroid cartilage. The ligature mark corresponded with the ligature material.

On internal examination neck muscles, hyoid bone and thyroid cartilage were intact. Brain was congested and cut section showed petechial haemorrhages in white matter. Lungs were edematous and cut section exuded dark-coloured fluid blood. All visceral organs were intact and congested. No abnormal odour was present in gastric contents. Plastic bag used for smothering and the cloth used to tie the plastic bag around the neck were sent to the regional forensic science laboratory for examination.

Cause of death was opined as asphyxia as a result of smothering.

CLINICO-PSYCHOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF THE MOTHER

During medical examination, she was physically weak, with pressure abrasion on her neck (a typical sign of hanging). Her speech was slow and her intelligence was clinically inferred as being intermediate. Her mood was evidently depressed and behaviour was apathetic. Laboratory and neurologic tests did not show any significant abnormalities. Her husband had died 2 years back following which she was not able to cope up with mental stress. She was found to have remarkable previous personal morbid events, previous suicide attempts and psychiatric hospitalisations. She killed her daughter by covering the plastic bag over head and face and tying the bag with cloth piece around the neck. After some minutes, she attempted suicide by hanging; a relative found her and was taken to hospital. She was discharged after staying in hospital for a week.

DISCUSSION

Filicide has existed since the dawn of mankind. In ancient Greco-Roman times, a father was allowed to kill his own

child without legal repercussions. It has a presence in the literature from all eras. Perhaps the most famous also the oldest is the story of Medea, a woman who killed her children to punish her husband for his affair.

Society's opinions about parents who kill their children are often strongly held but quite ambivalent. On one end of the spectrum, society feels that justice must be served for the senseless loss of innocent lives, on the other end even without having a full understanding of the complexities of mental illness, society believes on some level that something must be terribly wrong with a parent who kills his or her own child. This presents some explanation for the society's mixed emotions regarding the use of the insanity plea in filicide cases.

When the outcome of a typical case of homicide suicide is modified and the suicide of the murderer is not accomplished, two aspects become important: the legal consequences to be faced by the murderer and the management of the psychological impact on the survivor. Regarding prevention, the knowledge of homicide suicide and its associated factors requires constant attention by mental health professionals. The mother was charged with murder under section 302 IPC, even after considering the presence of a severe depressive disorder with psychotic symptoms, due to the presence of insight at the time of committing murder. The placement of filicidal parents depends upon the outcome of their legal proceedings. Those found guilty of murder will most likely serve their sentence in a prison. Mothers who commit filicide are much more likely to be shown mercy by the courts when compared to fathers. Men are more frequently sent to prison and executed when compared to their female counterparts. In this case, the mother was the perpetrator; many studies of filicide-suicide found that almost twice as many fathers as mothers committed filicide-suicides, with fathers tending to kill more of their children than did mothers^[7,8].

Resnick⁴ noted that three-fourths of the parents had psychiatric symptoms prior to committing filicide and 40% had recently seen a physician or psychiatrist. In fact, some mothers talked openly of suicide and even expressed concern about the future of their children. Study by Coryell^[9] showed that more than two-thirds of both

suicide completers and attempters have been found to suffer major depressive episodes at the time of their suicidal act. In our case, the mother was suffering from major depression, with history of past suicide attempts and poor social support.

Homicide-suicide is a difficult event to research, due to its rarity and the reliance on retrospective data. Some authors have emphasised the advantages of studying cases of homicide-suicide attempt in comparison with cases of homicide-suicide because regarding the latter, the murderers also died and cannot be interviewed or explain the reasons for their behaviour. On the other hand, in cases such as the one investigated in our study, in which the perpetrator failed in her suicide attempt, individual was available to be investigated, increasing the possibility of new explanations about her motivations and psychic conditions as they are likely to have similar characteristics to the homicide-suicide group^[10].

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