

Case Report

Dyadic Death

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ABSTRACT

Homicide-suicide episodes are complex phenomenon and multidimensional events associated with the additive or multiplicative effects of many circumstances, including psychopathological, psychosocial, economical, cultural or environmental stress. The present case is being reported with an attempt to evaluate the episode so that preventive measures could be adopted.

Keywords: Dyadic death, Hanging, Drowning

INTRODUCTION

Dyadic death (homicide-suicide) is defined as a violent event in which an individual commits homicide and subsequently commits suicide within a few hours. They are relatively infrequent events, resulting in death of family members, young children and cause additional morbidity, family disruption and childhood psychological trauma¹. The common features in all such deaths are a family relationship or close bond between the perpetrator and victim/s². Although it is a rare event, it is widely published in the media, and therefore such events may seem to be increasing in frequency³.

Most of such deaths are un-witnessed causing difficulties in obtaining proper and reliable account of the attendant circumstances.

In this communication, we are reporting a case with an attempt to evaluate the episode so that preventive measures could be initiated to avert such deaths.

CASE HISTORY

Dead bodies of 26-year-old female along with her two daughters, 4-year-old and 11-month-old, were submitted

for autopsy at Department of Forensic Medicine, KIMS. History given by police revealed that mother killed her first daughter by hanging using cotton rope, second daughter by throwing in the bucket containing water (Figure 1) and she committed suicide by hanging (Figure. 2). Husband was working as a software engineer and had lost the job 2 months back. As per relatives, she was not able to cope up with mental stress following harassment for dowry by her husband.

Case 1 (Mother): On external examination, dead body was measuring 168 cm, moderately built and nourished. Rigor mortis present throughout the body. Post-mortem lividity was present over the back of the body and fixed. An oblique ligature mark was present over front and both sides of neck above the level of thyroid cartilage. On internal examination, hyoid bone and thyroid cartilage were intact. Brain was congested, cut-section showing petechial haemorrhages in white matter. Lungs were edematous; c/s exudes dark coloured fluid blood. All visceral organs were intact and congested. No abnormal odour was present in gastric contents. Cause of death was opined as asphyxia as a result of hanging.



Figure 1: A 11-month-old daughter found immersed in the bucket in the bathroom



Figure 2: Mother and 4-year-old daughter found partially hanged using single cotton rope

Case 2 (Daughter): On external examination, dead body of female child aged about 4 years, measured 108 cm in length, moderately built and nourished. Rigor mortis present throughout the body. Post-mortem lividity was present over the back of the body and fixed. An oblique ligature mark was present over front and both sides of neck above the level of thyroid cartilage. On internal examination, hyoid bone and thyroid cartilage were intact. Brain was congested, c/s showing petechial haemorrhages in white matter. Lungs were edematous; c/s exudes dark coloured fluid blood. All visceral organs were intact and congested. No abnormal odour was present in gastric contents. Cause of death was opined as asphyxia as a result of hanging.

Case 3 (Daughter): On external examination, dead body of a female infant aged about 11 months, measured 68 cm in length and weighed 9 kg. Rigor mortis present throughout the body, post-mortem lividity was present at the back and fixed. Frothy fluid was seen coming out of nostrils. No external injuries were present over the body. On internal examination, white, leathery, fine, froth was seen in the trachea and bronchus. Both lungs were edematous. All internal organs were unremarkable. Cause of death was opined as asphyxia as a result of drowning.

DISCUSSION

Dyadic death is one of the most tragic forms of inter-family violence wherein an individual kills another member/s and commits suicide immediately or within short period⁴. Mental health problems are associated with most perpetrators⁵. The role of forensic experts is dual; on one hand, they have to provide cause of death and on other hand they, have to provide feedback for planning therapeutic or preventive strategies. Most investigations of homicide-suicide are done by police, coroners of the court and there is little or no input from psychiatric and other medical personnel. The doctors, doing medico-legal practice, are expected to address the social issues and aspects perceived during their role as forensic expert⁷.

The phenomenon of dyadic deaths is different from suicides. In suicide episodes, an individual prefer to die alone, whereas in homicide-suicide incidents the person kills other family members and then commits suicide. Possibility may be that person believed that after his demise there would be no one to take care of his family members and therefore he would have acted in such hostile manner. The contrary may also be possible that if 'I am not living then no one had right to live.' It is difficult to interpret the thought retrospectively as both the perpetrator and victim is dead, but psychological autopsy methodology could prove helpful to prevent such tragedies⁷.

In Indian context, mother is placed next to God. Since conception she nurtures and cares her child. She is considered as follower, a guide, a teacher, a companion, an advisor and so on. With continuing large-scale urbanisation and increasing trend of nuclear families, the

mothers are always in stress since she has to take care of husband as well as her wards.

The feature of relationship between perpetrator and victim/s was almost similar in the present case as well as other reports^{2,4,8}, either they are family members or closely related member of families. The assailant belonged to middle class; in contrast, Gupta *et al.*⁸ had recorded such episodes in only low socioeconomic class.

Financial stress, worry about future and security of daughters resulted in suicide-homicide. Since both children were female, it might have added to the stress as there was also an anger of dowry harassment. The anecdotal Indian literature has described homicide-suicides episodes involving male as a perpetrator^{2,4,9} but only few reports with mother as assailant had been published⁸.

Though such cases are rare, they are the eye openers and resurface many facts and facets of life. In India, usually the perpetrator is charged under Section 302 of Indian penal code for homicide. Law enforcement agencies will record the case, make appropriate investigations and close the case file as the offender is no more. But for achieving health of society, there should be social, psychological and psychiatric investigations to reduce or prevent the occurrence of such incidences.

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