

A case of hanging with creeper in secluded place: Suicide or homicide?

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Abstract: One of the principle roles of forensic pathologist while doing autopsy is to ascertain the manner of death, The manner of death is divided into natural and unnatural, the latter is subdivided into accidental, suicidal and homicidal. It is of utmost important to ascertain the manner of death to direct the investigating agencies to put on right path for further investigation. We have examined a case at government medical college and hospital, brought for medicolegal postmortem examination with history, the deceased was found in hanging position with a creeper called as ‘was him wel’ in local language which is very unusual ligature material and have never been documented in forensic literature. He was in partial hanging position to a tree in a farm at secluded place away from the village, His knees and hands were touching the ground in kneeling position. The relatives were suspicious about the manner of death and strongly pressurising the police to register a crime against unknown persons. The crime scene shows some beer bottles and eatables and cigarette butts near to the crime scene. But the vegetations near the crime scene were normal and showing no disturbance. But the place where the beer and eatables were present shows some disturbed area and crushed grass. From the overall crime scene investigation, postmortem findings and history collected by police it was concluded that most probably manner of death was suicidal and cause of death is given as “postmortem findings are consistent with death is due to hanging.”

Keywords: unnatural death, suicidal, homicidal, postmortem

INTRODUCTION:

Hanging is that form of asphyxia which is caused by suspension of the body by a ligature which encircles the neck, the constricting force being the weight of the body, the whole weight of the body is not necessary and only a comparatively slight force is enough to produce death[1]. Hanging is ordinarily presumed to be suicidal unless circumstantial and other evidences with autopsy findings are sufficient enough to rebut the presumption. Whereas homicidal hangings is rare and accidental hanging is rather uncommon [2].

Hanging is one of the 10-leading causes of death in the world, accounting for more than a million deaths annually. In India, hanging is one of the commonest methods of committing suicide followed by poisoning, burning and drowning. Over the past 30 years, the incidence of suicide by hanging has increased, especially among young adults [3]. The forensic expert must be aware of the unusual presentation of suicidal hanging as it may suggest the foul play, so the crime scene investigation along with the meticulous postmortem examination is of utmost importance to draw the clear demarcation between the manners of death.

Manner of death is the way to categorize death as required by the Washington State Department of Health. The classifications are natural, accident, suicide,

homicide, undetermined, and pending. Only medical examiners and coroners may use all of the manners of death. Other certifiers must use natural or refer the death to the medical examiner. The manner of death is determined by the medical examiner and it determines that how the death occurred [4].

CASE HISTORY

A deceased of age about 30 years, male was brought to casualty of government medical college and hospital with history, that the deceased was left home yesterday evening with his some friends and he does not returned to his home in night. So they enquired to his friends in morning but they have no idea. So family members left for searching him and went to farm about 5 km from their house, where he was found in his farm to his relatives in a partial hanging position to a tree of height 6 to 7 feet, with creeper (WashimVel) used as ligature material encircling around the neck. When the people enquired to police about the incidence then family members told police that he was with friends in night and not returned to home. After vigorous enquiry of the three friends of the deceased who was with him last night, they told that he was totally depressed and in frustration and talking about money problems and unemployment related issues. They drunk last night and after that they forced him to go to home but he does not heard and told them to go he will follow later. They don't know what happened later, but the family

members were not ready to hear anything and they have strong suspicion about the manner of death even though they haven't lodged any official complaint till then.

The body was then referred to dept. of forensic medicine for further medicolegal procedure.

Crime scene investigation,

The crime scene shows that there were six empty beer bottles and some eatables and wrappers of packet and cigarette butts were present about 15 meter away from the crime scene with the plant vegetations at this site were crushed but without much disturbance. But the vegetations near the crime scene were normal and showing no disturbance at all, there were many short and long creepers were present climbing over plants.

External findings

On examination, the deceased was moderately built, adult male of age about 30 years. Cloths were intact and stained with mud particles at places, and over the knees. No signs of tear and violence. Rigor mortis well marked & generalized. Gloves and stocking type of postmortem lividity present. Sub conjunctival haemorrhage present. Stains of dribbling of saliva present over left angle of mouth. Nail, tip of nose and

lips were cyanosed. Ligature material were present around the neck, composed of a creeper (WashimVel) having fixed knot, single loop, length of loop is 35 cm, diameter of ligature material is 1.5 cm, length of free ends are 115 cm and 118 cm. Ligature mark present around the neck above the level of thyroid cartilage, obliquely placed. Length of ligature mark is 29 cm. Ligature mark is dry, hard, parchment like, brown in colour. No any signs of injury were present over the body except ligature marks.

Internal findings:

On dissection of neck soft tissues below the ligature mark are dry, whitish, glistening. No injury to strap muscle. Hyoid bone, thyroid cartilage, cricoid cartilage were intact. Lungs congested and edematous, petechiae present, on cut section reddish fluid oozes out, brain was congested and edematous and petechiae present over the surface and heart shows petechial hemorrhages over the surface at places. All other organs were intact and congested. Stomach contains 200 cc semisolid food materials with peculiar alcoholic sour smell.

Histopathological examination of soft tissues reveals constriction band necrosis in neck muscles.



Fig-1: Partial hanging with creeper both the knees touching the ground.



Fig-2: Creeper as a ligature material, fixed knot, and brownish coloured ligature mark around the neck.



Fig-3: Fixed knot of creeper used as ligature material.



Fig-4: Condition of strap muscles of neck under the ligature.



Fig-5: Constriction band necrosis in neck muscles.

DISCUSSION:

Hanging is a form of ligature strangulation in which the force applied to the neck is derived from a gravitational drag of the weight of the body or part of the body[5]. In complete hanging whole body is suspended; no part of the body touches the ground[1,7]. In partial hanging, the bodies are partially suspended, the toes or feet touching the ground, or in sitting, kneeling, lying down, prone, or any other posture, with only the head is off the ground the whole weight of body is not necessary, and only a comparatively slight force is enough to produce death. The weight of head 5 to 6 kg chest and arms act as the constricting force, depending on the knot [1,6].

As far as present case is concerned the investigation of crime scene does not indicate any signs of struggle, any violence except casual disturbance of grass and presence of persons, neither any suspicious material at the place nor any injuries over the body except ligature mark, these injuries were typical in nature that of hanging, with knot at left postero-lateral aspect of neck ligature mark running obliquely upwards and backwards symmetrically on both sides of neck, signs of dribbling of saliva, signs of cyanosis over the body, suggestive of typical hanging.

In almost all the cases ligature material used is a commonly available material like rope, saree, dupatta, dhoti etc. But the ligature material like creeper is totally uncommon and had not been documented in literature. In this case the hanging after consumption of alcohol with friends, without any premeditation and after sudden impulse while under the influence leads to use of creeper as ligature material which is present at the place and may be the most accessible one.

CONCLUSION:

From above study, after the examination of crime scene, history given by police and friends and finally the typical findings of ligature mark around the neck, status of strap muscles of neck, and absence of any gross major signs of violence over the body it was concluded that the death was due to partial hanging.

Contribution

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Conflict of Interest

None declared

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