

CASE REPORT

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Self-implanted subcutaneous penile balls – a new phenomenon in Western Europe

Received: 18 September 1996 / Received in revised form: 3 December 1996

Abstract The subcutaneous self-implantation of spherical objects in the penis is a well-known practice among members of the *Yakuza* in Japan but this phenomenon has not previously been described in the Western world. However, recently there were two cases in Berlin of young Eastern European men in whom implanted penile balls as in the *Yakuza* were found at autopsy. Investigations in Russia revealed that this phenomenon is typically encountered there among prisoners and in certain army units. In addition to the feeling of belonging to a specific group, increased sexual confidence is one major reason for these implantations that are usually performed under primitive conditions.

Key words Penile balls · Penology · *Yakuza* · Self-mutilation · Sexual medicine

Introduction

The sociocultural aspects regarding visible external signs of belonging to a specific group are extremely diversified. A form of intentional stigmatization unusual in our society is spherical penile implants. In two recent autopsy cases we found small plastic balls subcutaneously implanted in the anterior third of the penis. Both cases involved young Eastern European men.

Case histories

In February 1996, residents discovered the body of a young man lying in the street. The autopsy revealed that the man had obviously collapsed from myocarditis and died. There were no signs of

physical violence. Criminal investigations showed that the 23-year-old man from Rumania lived in Germany as an illegal alien. He was sought by the police in Berlin for common grand larceny. The Rumanian authorities reported that he had already been jailed in his own country for a number of other offences. At the external examination of the body, three movable objects were found at the distal third of the dorsum of the penis near the prepuce (Fig. 1a), which were first assumed to be a dermatological condition. About 10 mm proximal to this on the left side of the penis were two adjacent fresh purplish-gray cicatrices measuring about 7 mm in diameter, one of which was covered by an old secretion crust. After preparation of the penis three subcutaneous balls were revealed surrounded by inflammation-free tissue (Fig. 1b). The balls were partially transparent, partially opaque and spherical (diameter 6 mm) or oval shaped (7 × 5 × 5 mm) (Fig. 1c).

Another case involved a 26-year-old Russian whose body was found in the Berlin City Forest. Autopsy showed that he had died from a shot through the head.

Criminal investigations revealed that the man had been involved in illegal business transactions in Berlin in connection with drug dealing and prostitution. The man had no criminal record in Russia. He had served 2 years as a soldier in the Army of the Russian Federation.

Subcutaneously implanted balls were also found at autopsy, one on the ventral side of the penis, another on the left side of the prepuce. In this case they were 12 × 8 mm guttate glass balls, one white and the other transparent and old round cicatrices similar to those found previously were seen proximal to the implanted balls.

Discussion

The phenomenon of implantation of penile balls is not uncommon in other cultures but is a new occurrence in our society. The first description in the literature of a case involving a ball implanted in the frenulum of the penis was reported from Japan in 1962 [5]. In Japan, the subcutaneous implantations of such balls are almost exclusively found among members of the *Yakuza*, a criminal organization with mafia-like structures and codices [2, 7]. A serial examination carried out at a Japanese prison among gang members revealed that 22% of the men had implanted penile balls [6]. In general 1–4 balls were found but in some cases there were 8 or more and one man had 20 implanted balls. In a number of cases, tattoos and/or digital amputations were observed in addition to implanted

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Fig. 1a Body of a 23-year-old man with movable objects in the dorsum penis. In close proximity two fresh cicatrices, where the skin was penetrated with a sharp object to push the balls forward subcutaneously

Fig. 1b On preparation there were subcutaneous balls with no inflammatory reactions

Fig. 1c In this case three plastic spherules could be isolated from the penis. Two of the balls were transparent (yellow and pink), one frosted (opaque). Scale indicates mm

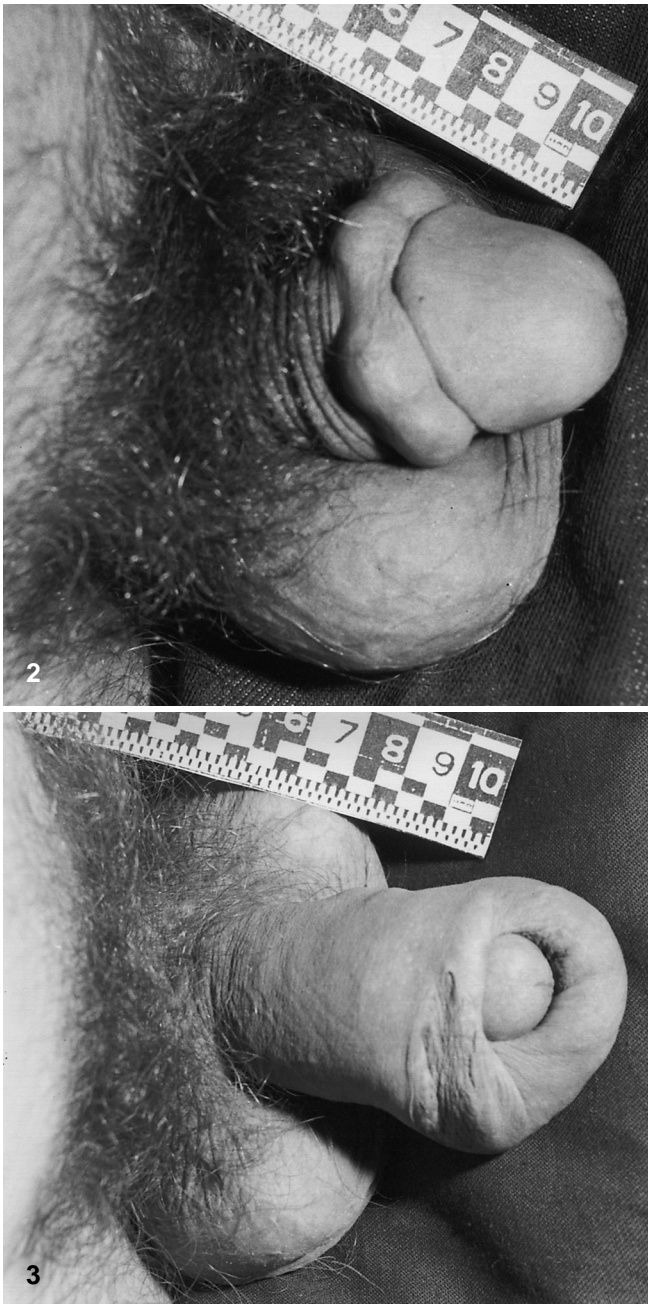


Fig. 2 A 35-year-old male prisoner from Russia. The penis showed a corona with seven self-implanted plastic balls within the prepuce. The man stated that the spheres had been inserted over a period of 2 years, using wooden splinters as „surgical instruments“. The balls were made from heat-melted parts of a comb

Fig. 3 A 28-year-old male prisoner from Russia. Repeated injections of silicone ointment in the prepuce over a period of 7 days. The procedure was done 6 months previously using a small steel pipe. The scars of the injections can still be seen in the dorsum praeputii

penile balls. The former were usually a sign of penitence or loyalty to the gang leader [6].

Implanted penile balls are not unusual in Russia either and it is mostly prisoners and soldiers who manipulate themselves in this manner (Figs. 2–4).



Fig. 4 A 40-year-old male prisoner from Russia. Implantation of a plastic button in the dorsal prepuce. A plastic ring made from the melted material of a comb was inserted through the frenulum praeputii

Plastic balls are predominantly used in Russia and Japan. In prison these balls, which are filed or formed after heating, are made from toothbrush handles, combs or buttons [6, 7] and occasionally paraffin globules are inserted. Outside prison, glass balls, pearls or precious stones are implanted. These balls have a diameter ranging from 5 to 8 mm and can be globular or rod-shaped objects measuring between $6 \times 6 \times 8$ and $5 \times 7 \times 24$ mm [6].

Implantations in prison are usually performed under primitive conditions. The skin of the penis is penetrated with a sharp object. A small tunnel is then made with a sharpened toothpick and the ball is pushed through this tunnel. The procedure is done without anesthesia. Paper clips or wooden splinters are used as “surgical instruments”. Only one ball or object is implanted in one session and usually there is an interval of several days or even months between sessions.

In the Russian Army, implantations are done under slightly more “professional” conditions using a knife, scalpel or spiritus for disinfection. Implantations in military installations are usually performed by selected individuals with a certain reputation who work primarily in the medical corps.

Evidently, the complication rate is quite high. In addition to inflammation, rejection reactions are frequently observed. Superinfections, functional impotencia coeundi, urethral stenosis or sepsis are also not uncommon.

The motivations for implanting spherules into the penis are certainly manifold and culture-related. The demonstrative – although concealed – membership of a specific group is probably a more superficial aspect. This practice among members of the *Yakuza* or certain groups within the Russian Army or in prisons is probably much more closely related to the motivations involved in tattooing [1,

4]. The implantation procedure itself as well as the fact that members of a specific group are willing to undergo this type of permanent stigmatization obviously emphasizes the high degree of loyalty and motivation toward such a “conspiratorial” community. This is especially true for the *Yakuza*.

Further important aspects are the sexual and related confidence-promoting components. The groups in question are usually tightly organized and hierarchically structured male communities with a need to constantly prove masculinity. The implantations carried out under primitive and painful conditions also serve as a sign of being able to bear extreme physical pain [6]. In addition, there is also the belief maintained by members of the group that the altered surface of the penis arouses women in a special way and that erections can be prolonged. There have even been literary references on this topic [3].

Now that the borders to the Eastern European countries are open, the phenomenon of implanted penile balls will also occasionally be encountered here in Germany. In view of the increasing cultural admixture, it remains to be seen to what extent this form of physical mutilation will be encountered in the Western European prisons. So far,

the two autopsy cases described here only involved men from Eastern Europe. In the forensic practice, the phenomenon of implanted penile balls may be an indication of a possible sociocriminal background.

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