

CASE REPORT

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The lethal paraphiliac syndrome: accidental autoerotic deaths in four women and a review of the literature

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Abstract Four previously unpublished cases of female asphyxiophilia are presented. All women were found immobilised by obviously self-tied ropes, string or handcuffs. The women, who were alone at the time of death, died of a lethal paraphilia. The autopsies revealed asphyxiation as the cause of death, caused in two cases by suffocation as a result of hanging and strangulation and in the other two cases by plastic bags placed over the individuals head. In one case there was additional evidence at the scene that the deceased had inhaled ether. In none of the four cases was there any indication that the asphyxiation was due to homicide or suicide. Thus they can be described as accidental autoerotic deaths (AAD). The four cases closely mirror findings from scenes of male AADs, although autoerotic practices are generally believed to be rarer among females than in males.

Keywords Female accidental autoerotic death · Lethal paraphiliac syndrome · Non-lethal paraphilia · Paraphiliac pattern

Introduction

Since the 1950s an ever-increasing number of accidental autoerotic deaths (AADs) have been reported [1, 2, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 19, 23]. However, the vast majority of reported cases have been males. Thus, cases of autoerotic

fatalities among females are not only rare but also pose a challenge to investigators. Moreover, most of the female cases reported in the literature are identical and not all cases designated as AADs fulfilled the criteria according to the definition [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23], which requires an accidental, solitary death caused by a lethal paraphilia [1].

Persons who engage in paraphiliac behaviour and who accidentally “overdo” the paraphilia needed for their sexual arousal and orgasm may die of the paraphilia. In these fatal cases, the paraphilia is the unintended and direct cause of death and is regarded as lethal if it is inherently life-threatening. An AAD is considered as typical when accompanying non-lethal paraphilia and/or props are present. In cases of atypical AAD, accompanying non-lethal paraphilia and/or props are absent [1].

The most common lethal paraphilia is hanging followed by plastic bag asphyxiation. AAD is also called asphyxiophilia or hypoxiphilia, which is the deliberate induction of a cerebral hypoxia in order to produce or enhance sexual excitement. These terms are now classified as a subgroup of the paraphilias [16]. The paraphilia is defined as a non-psychotic mental disorder where unusual or bizarre imagery or acts are necessary for sexual excitement. Such imagery or acts tend to be insistently and involuntarily repetitive [16].

The challenge in describing a case accurately as an AAD lies partly in the fact that the typical AAD can very closely resemble a sadistic and/or ritualistic homicide. On the other hand there is a similarity between the atypical AAD and suicide by hanging, which is the second most frequent type of suicide in women. With non-asphyxial causes of death (e.g. by sharp force), the forensic pathologist has to differentiate between suicide and homicide [18]. With asphyxial causes of death, AAD has to be considered if homicide and suicide have been ruled out.

However, the following four previously unpublished cases show that a female autoerotic accident may closely resemble a typical male AAD (Table 1). Therefore, extra care has to be taken in considering every alternative cause of death, because a homicide must not be ruled out ini-

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Table 1 Paraphiliac pattern by lethal and non-lethal paraphilia in four cases

Case details	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
Age of deceased (years)	17	28	28	48
Lethal paraphilia	Plastic bag asphyxiation	Plastic bag asphyxiation	Strangulation	Hanging
Ligatures	–	Rope around neck	Dog chain around neck	Rope around neck
Body position	Prone in bed on back	Prone in bed on back	Prone in bed face down	Standing in basement
Non-lethal paraphilia				
Bondage	x	–	x	x
Paraphernalia				
Vaginal fetish	x	–	x	–
Pornography	–	x	–	–
Oral fetish	x	x	x	x
Fetish	–	x	–	–
Other				
Masturbatory activity	x	–	x	–
Naked	x	x	x	–
Protective padding	x	x	–	x
Self-rescue mechanism	x	x	x	x
Repetitive	–	x	x	–
Sexual problems	–	–	x	–
Social status	Student	Employee	Student	Employee
Undisturbed	x	x	x	x
Found by	Boyfriend	Father	Boyfriend	?

Fig. 1 A 17-year-old woman lying partly on bed. A plastic bag is placed over the head and the body and extremities are tied up



tially and because some of the typical paraphilia found in male cases, such as pornographic literature, may be absent in female AADs.

Case reports

Case 1

A 17-year-old female was found dead by her fiancé, naked and lying on her back (Fig. 1). A plastic bag was over her head and tied tightly at the level of the eyes with a nylon stocking. Another nylon stocking was tied around the body encircling the body at the level of the nipples. A long bandage, tied tightly with a slip-knot in front of the abdomen, encircled the body and legs in a criss-cross

manner from the middle of the abdomen to the middle of the calves. The nightdress was caught up in this bandage and was pulled tightly from the middle of the back to the abdomen across the middle of the vulva. A set of toy handcuffs was fastened on the right wrist, the feet were tied together with a piece of bandage wrapped several times around the feet with a knot on the right side and covered by a plastic bag. A dressing gown was held fairly tightly between the thighs and covered the lower legs. It appeared that there had been a stimulation of the clitoris by manual manipulation of the nightdress, which was pulled tightly through the crotch.

Case 2

A 28-year-old female was found naked lying on the bed on her back and a plastic bag was tightened with a string around her neck.

Fig. 2 A 28-year-old woman bound with chains, lying in the autopsy room. The pattern of the chains is clearly visible, showing similarity to a typical homicide ritual of the Italian mafia called “incaprettamento” [12]



Fig. 3 A 48-year-old woman hanging fully dressed in a basement doorway with protective padding of the neck; the feet are tied up

In the plastic bag there was a washcloth with the smell of ether. Next to the body a horsewhip and several small bottles containing ether were found.

Case 3

A 28-year-old female was found by her fiancé lying face down naked on the bed (Fig. 2). A red scarf was wound around her face, a dog chain was tied around the neck and attached to the tied feet by a belt with a slip-knot. A leather belt was tightened around the abdomen with a metal chain running from the back to the abdomen and encircling the genitals. The chains were arranged in such a manner that the deceased was able to increase the pressure around the neck and stimulate the genitals by moving her tied feet. The inquiries revealed that the women had suffered from vaginismus and therefore did not want vaginal penetration by her boyfriend. Previously, she had told a close friend that she was performing dangerous masturbation rituals involving strangulation and that she had sadomasochistic fantasies. According to the psychologist who was consulted by the woman due to her sexual problems, she believed that in her previous life she had been a man and that within her heart she felt like a man. Psychological tests had revealed that she had fantasies and associations of torture nurtured by curiosity and

not by fear. The fantasies were subconscious and had not been treated prior to the time of death.

Case 4

A 48-year-old female was found fully dressed in an atypical hanging situation in the basement, standing on the stairway (Fig. 3). Her feet were tied and a red scarf was wound around the head and protecting the neck.

In all cases a medicolegal autopsy was performed and showed no indications of third party violence. No spermatozoa were found in the vaginal swabs. Neither alcohol nor drugs were found in blood samples of the deceased women. In none of the cases was there any history of medicine abuse. The cause of death was found to be autoerotic asphyxia in all four cases.

Discussion

In all four cases, natural death, suicide and homicide could be ruled out. The doors were locked from the inside, the deceased were alone in an undisturbed place with lack of suicidal intent or any history of depression. There was no evidence of any use of force by a third party.

Furthermore, close examination revealed that all of the ropes and other paraphilia could have been tied by the individuals. This obviously does not exclude the use of violence by other persons. However, the solitary nature of the typical AAD would make it unlikely that knots and other paraphilia should be placed in such a way that the deceased could not have done it alone.

In all cases a lethal paraphilia, hanging, suffocation by strangulation or asphyxiation by a plastic bag were the direct cause of the unintended death. In addition, there were other non-lethal paraphilia, such as tying of the body and extremities and different kinds of paraphernalia. Therefore, all cases fulfilled the criteria of typical AADs. Additionally, in one case vaginismus, sadomasochistic fantasies and elaborate masturbation rituals involving strangulation were documented.

It is unknown if female autoerotic practitioners are in fact more rare, or if they are more cautious than their male counterparts, if they use other methods possibly not

Table 2 Female cases of lethal and non-lethal paraphilia in the literature

Reference	No.	Age (years)	Lethal paraphilia (LP)	Non-lethal paraphilia (NLP)	Description
Entiknapp [11]	1	19	Yes (asphyx-iophilia by nitrous oxide)	No	Atypical AAD
Dürwald [10]	3	?	No	No	No AAD, natural death during masturbation
Henry [17]	1	19	Yes (hanging)	Yes (harem clothes, evidence of repetitive behaviour)	Typical AAD
Krings [19]	3	?	No	No	Suicides
Daucher [7]	1	48	No	Yes (bondage, evidence of repetitive behaviour)	No AAD. Asphyxial masochistic bondage. Accidental drowning in bathtub
Sass [22]	1	35	Yes (strangulation)	No	Atypical AAD
Du Chesne et al. [9]	6	?	Yes (one case)	No	Literature-review. One atypical AAD (same as above). All other deaths with sexual circumstances
Danto [6]	1	21	No	Yes (bondage)	No AAD. Death by aspiration and drowning
Hazelwood et al. [14]	4	20–30	–	–	Presumably same cases as in Hazelwood et al. 16
Hazelwood et al. [15]	2	20, 30	–	–	Murders? Equivocal cases
Dietz and Hazelwood [8]	2	22, twen-ties	No	One NLP	No AADs. Death by aspiration following masochism and hypoxia by neck ligature. Undetermined cause of death, masturbating with a sausage in vagina. Same as Randall et al 21?
Burgess and Hazelwood [2]	5	–	–	–	Presumably same cases as Hazelwood et al. 16
Hazelwood et al. [16]	5	20–40	Yes	Yes (bondage)	Typical AAD
Byard and Bramwell [3]	1	19	Yes	Yes (bondage)	Typical AAD
Randall et al. [21]	1	29	No	No	Living woman had inserted an animal's tongue into the vagina as a masturbatory tool. Same case as Dietz and Hazelwood [8]?
Byard et al. [4]	?	19–68	Yes/No	No	Literature review
Marc et al. [20]	1	4	No	No	No AAD. Air embolism subsequent to vaginal insertion of a foreign body for an autoerotic purpose
Uva [23]	9	19–45	Yes (5 cases)	Yes	Literature review 5 AADs
Gosink and Jumbelic [13]	1	31	Yes (ligature strangulation)	Yes (ligature around the breasts)	Typical AAD

recognised, or if they are misdiagnosed at the scene of death or post-mortem examination. In both male and female AADs there is a continual elaboration of the masturbatory ritual concerning the paraphiliac pattern. In atypical AADs of both sexes without non-lethal paraphilia or paraphernalia/props, the correct classification of AAD may be difficult and an AAD might even be overlooked. The four females present with the continuum of the spectrum of AAD and are exactly as elaborate with non-lethal paraphilias and props as it is known from males. Therefore, the findings in these four cases do not support the statement that women would not engage in equally elaborate rituals as males [3, 4, 5]. In the literature, 57 female AADs have been reported but many of them are identical (Table 2). When the remaining cases [3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23] are scrutinised according to the definition of AAD, according to which, a death is only an AAD if it is solitary, accidental and caused by a lethal paraphilia, only 10 cases [3, 11, 13, 16, 17, 22] fulfil these criteria (Table 2). The rest of the cases would better be described as either suicides [19], natural death during mas-

turbation [8, 9, 10, 20] or accidents not directly caused by lethal paraphilia [6, 7, 8, 9]. One non-lethal case, which has been reported twice [8, 21], should probably be described more accurately as an extraordinary masturbation and has nothing to do with the concept of AAD. The four cases presented in this manuscript, as well as previously reported series [1, 16, 23] of female and male cases, revealed no special documentation of premorbid psyche, sexual abuse in childhood, sexual/psychiatric history or special investigations in relatives concerning their knowledge of the behaviour. The evaluation of these circumstances, however, might help to differentiate future AADs from homicides.

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