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Homicidal Hanging Masquerading as Sexual Asphyxia

Accidental asphyxiation occasionally results from autoerotic activity related to the sexual perversion of bondage, a variant of sadomasochism [1-4]. These deaths occur predominantly in the adolescent male population but also rarely in females [5,6]. They are generally accepted as being accidental, although a recent textbook describes them as suicides [7].

We recently investigated a case in which the details of the scene and autopsy mimicked an accidental sexual asphyxia.

Case Report

A 31-year-old, single, white male of East Indian descent was found at 2:40 p.m. by his apartment manager to be hanging lifeless in the bathroom. The manager had been prompted to check the apartment because he had not seen the deceased during the day. The previous evening he had observed two black females carrying something from the deceased's apartment which they deposited in his car and drove away.

The deceased was in the United States on a student visa. He was employed as a trainee in an electronics firm and was described by his employer and friends as a likeable person, not known for unusual behavior.

The victim was found hanging by the neck from a necktie tied to the shower curtain rod (Fig 1). He was facing away from the tub with his feet touching the floor and his knees flexed. He was blindfolded with another necktie; a black belt was around his neck. There was another necktie about his neck in addition to the one forming the noose. The victim's hands were tied tightly behind his back with a necktie. This had been double tied with an initial slipknot and then a double half hitch. About the ankles was another necktie. The deceased was clothed in a T-shirt, brown trousers, and underbriefs. He was not wearing shoes. The trousers were not unzipped.

Examination of the apartment revealed a library of approximately 70 books, one of which was pornographic, depicting "straight" heterosexuality. Two empty pint rum bottles were found in the wastepaper basket. The deceased's color television set and wristwatch were missing. A moderately expensive stereophonic record player was present. The deceased's car was not in the parking lot.

About his neck was a single circumferential ligature mark oriented diagonally upward toward the rear. There were petechial hemorrhages of the eyelids, the epiglottis, the pericardium, and the pleural surfaces of the lungs. The superior horns of the thyroid

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FIG. 1—*The victim as discovered.*

cartilage were fractured. The lungs were congested, with a combined weight of 940 g. The remaining internal examination showed only visceral congestion. The blood alcohol content of postmortem blood was 0.21 g/100 ml.

Three hypotheses come to mind: first, that the deceased died accidentally as a result of autoerotic behavior, a sexual asphyxia. This hypothesis was discounted because the ligature about the wrist could not possibly be tied behind the back; had the ligature been tied in the front, the deceased could not have stepped through this binding while his neck was tied. The deceased was fully clothed and the usual bondage pornography was absent.

A second hypothesis was that the deceased died accidentally as a result of sexual bondage activities in which the two black females played a role. The same objections, presence of clothing and absence of bondage literature, arise in this regard.

The third hypothesis was that this death resulted from the deceased being bound by the black females during the course of their robbery of the deceased. The explanation for his lack of effective resistance was the 0.21 g/100 ml blood alcohol content.

Subsequently the black females were identified. They related that they had encountered the deceased as a client in their business of prostitution. He had paid them \$20 in advance for anticipated heterosexual activity. With the proceeds they purchased cocaine which, upon inhalation, they found to be of low potency. They had demanded additional funds with which to purchase more cocaine. The deceased, by this time highly intoxicated with alcohol, refused further expenditure. They set about immobilizing the deceased in the fashion observed and stole his watch, television, and car. The victim, apparently too intoxicated to stand erect, asphyxiated from the weight of his body on the noose.

Subsequent investigation revealed that the prostitutes were involved in straight heterosexual activities and were not known to cater to the desires of the bondage-discipline subculture.

Conclusion

This case demonstrates that human behavior is variable and that effective investigation of a death requires the careful consideration of scene evidence, the circumstances, and the background of the deceased correlated with the autopsy and toxicological examinations.

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