

CASE REPORT

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A Rare Suicidal Case of a Ten-Year-Old Child Stabbing Himself in the Throat

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ABSTRACT: A rare case is reported of a ten-year-old boy who committed suicide by stabbing himself in the throat with a pointed knife. Possibility of an accidental injury was excluded by the autopsy findings; suspicion of a homicide by his father was cleared through the deposition of his sister. The reason of suicide was attributed directly to his father's severe scolding and indirectly to his mother's death two years before.

KEYWORDS: pathology and biology, suicide, stab wounds, children, self-injury

The most common way of suicide is hanging in Japan (about 50%) [1]; jumping from a high place comes next (about 20%). Use of edged tools still remains a national tradition (about 2%) in resolved suicides. However in children under 15 years of age, suicides are rare in general, and even when they happen, they usually appear in ambiguous forms that are likely to be confused with accidental deaths, for example, hangings, downfalls, or drownings [2].

Stabbing oneself with a pointed knife, since it reveals a definite resolution to kill oneself, is quite an unusual act in children. To our knowledge, the present case represents the first report about the suicide of a ten-year-old boy by stabbing himself in the throat.

Case Report

According to the police investigation, a ten-year-old boy was severely scolded by his father for having left his room in disorder; the father found an unsheathed knife and gestured towards his own throat saying that it might be fateful if one were careless. The father then went to the bathroom and on his way back he heard a painful groan from the boy, who was found lying on the bed, face up, still conscious, in a pool of blood. The knife was stuck in his throat. His daughter, the boy's elder sister, called an ambulance telephoning the Fire Rescue; the boy was carried to a hospital but died within an hour.

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The boy's body was submitted to the Department of Legal Medicine of the Shinshu University Medical School for medico-legal autopsy. No suicide note was discovered in the boy's room. Figure 1 shows the knife that was responsible for the boy's death; it had a sharp point and a 7.3-cm-long and 2.0-cm-wide blade, with a 5.0-cm-long single edge which was whetted on one side.

At autopsy, the body measured 143 cm in height and weighed 37.3 kg [3]. A stab wound (1.0 by 2.0 cm) was found on the throat which was associated with three incisions on the margin (Fig. 2).

Three internal stabs were also identified inside the wound, showing that the wound was not made by accident but with a purpose.

One stab cut the right half side of the trachea and right vertebral artery and ended in an incision (1.5-cm length) on the right frontal side of the body of the VI cervical vertebra. The other two stabs penetrated the esophagus at the left side of the trachea ending on the frontal side of the same cervical vertebra.

So-called defense wounds and hesitation marks were not observed. Bloody froth was present in the mouth and nasal cavity. About 300 mL of bloody fluid was found in the stomach. Pulmonary congestion and edema were remarkable. Histological examination of major organs failed to reveal any disorders that might indicate neurological or hormonal instability.

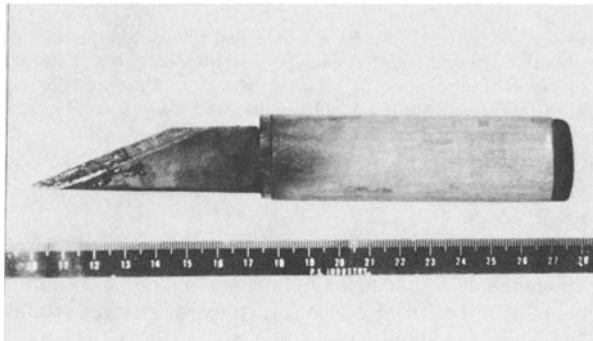


FIG. 1—*The knife used by the child to stab his own throat.*

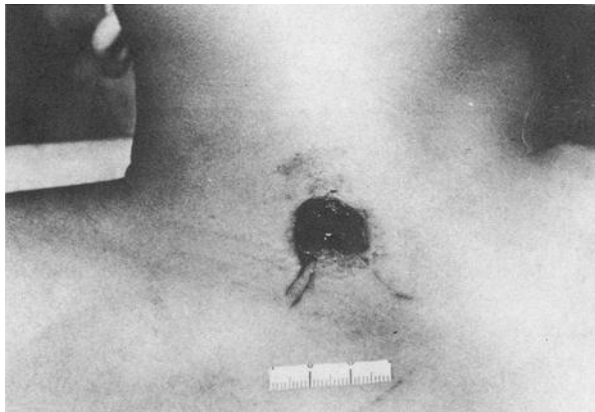


FIG. 2—*The self-inflicted stab wound in the throat of the child.*

The cause of death was judged to be hemorrhage from the vertebral artery and subsequent choking with blood inspired into trachea.

Discussion

A child's suicide by stabbing in the throat is an extraordinary affair. Initially, homicide by the father was suspected by police authorities. The autopsy finding which revealed multiple stabs excluded the possibility of an accident; the case was considered an alternative of homicide or suicide. Most homicidal and suicidal stab wounds can be differentiated from each other. In general, evidence of a struggle including minor injuries on hands or arms which are often called defense marks would indicate a homicide, and minor parallel cuts or stabs on the wrist or breast which are referred to hesitation marks would suggest a suicide. In this case, however, no such injuries were observed other than the stabs in the throat; only the minor stabs inside the wound including the two in the esophagus might be interpreted as evidence supporting self-injury.

The boy had been emotionally depressed, as the father stated, since his mother died of natural disease two years previously. Since then he had become a pupil of Jehova's Witness together with his sister; he sometimes said that if he died he could meet his mother in heaven. Thus his mental state might be traced to his impulse to kill himself triggered by the rebuke of his father.

The father was suspected by the police to be responsible for the boy's death either by killing him or by abetting him in suicide; he made his own situation more difficult by insisting that it was an accident which disagreed with autopsy findings; he could clear himself of the suspicion only through the statement of his daughter, the boy's sister, who had overheard the whole episode from the next room.

Acknowledgment

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