

CASE REPORT

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Autoerotic Asphyxial Death Following Television Broadcast

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ABSTRACT: How individuals who engage in autoerotic asphyxial activities first become aware of its purported erotic potential is debated. The case of an adult male who died from autoerotic asphyxiation shortly after watching a television show that discussed sexual asphyxiation is reported. A request is made that medical examiners and coroners report other accidental autoerotic deaths that are temporally associated with this television broadcast.

KEYWORDS: pathology and biology, asphyxia, death, deviant sexual behavior, autoerotism, sexual asphyxia

Perplexing questions concerning autoerotic asphyxiation include how individuals first learn of asphyxial techniques during autoerotic activity and whether education about the dangers of such activity will prevent some accidental deaths or promote dangerous experimentation. In this paper a case is reported of accidental death from autoerotic asphyxiation by hanging. This death followed the viewing of a "talk show" television program devoted to information and warnings about autoerotic asphyxiation practices, specifically targeting the problem in teenagers.

Case Report

A 38-year-old white male was found dead by his father hanging by a jump rope tied to a rafter in the garage of his residence. The victim had been divorced for several years and lived with his parents. His mother was out of town at the time of death. The father had last seen the victim alive at 4:00 p.m., 11 May 1988. The victim knew his father would be gone until late that evening attending a lodge meeting. The garage was locked from the inside.

When the father returned from the meeting, he found his son dead in a sitting position on the garage floor with a bench next to the body. He was nude except for shoes and stockings (normal male type). His right hand was between his legs, holding his penis. He was held upright by a jump rope tied around his neck. This noose was padded with a bathrobe between the rope and the skin of his neck.

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The father cut the rope with a knife, initiated mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and dialed the local emergency number. Police and paramedics responded but the victim could not be revived. The responding police officer immediately recognized this as a case of autoerotic asphyxiation based on having seen a television program about the subject that afternoon. The program was a popular talk show that was broadcast nationally and was received on the west coast from three to four p.m., Pacific Daylight Saving Time, 11 May 1988.

The autopsy showed asphyxial death with facial petechial hemorrhages and rope marks on the anterior neck. A large seminal fluid deposit was on the inner right thigh. No other significant autopsy findings were present.

Interviews with the father and a scene visit indicated that no sexual props were used. The father stated that his son was not suicidal and, to his knowledge, had never engaged in this type of activity before. He stated that his son told him he was going to watch the program in question. The television set was still on the channel on which the program had aired.

The ex-wife was interviewed, and she knew of no autoerotic asphyxial activity or other deviant sexual practices on the part of the subject.

Discussion

This is clearly a case of death as a result of autoerotic asphyxiation as manifested by the nudity, the padded neck ligature, the hand on the penis, and the sitting position which would allow an escape mechanism. There was no history of previous similar activity. None of the sexual props or cross dressing that sometimes accompanies repetitive autoerotism were present.

How people learn of the alleged pleasure of sexual asphyxiation is debated. Literature reports range from self-discovery to word of mouth and pornography [1-3]. To our knowledge this is the first reported fatal case in which the activity was learned from a nationally broadcast television program.

Whether public education about the dangers of autoerotic asphyxial activity will prevent accidental deaths, or promote dangerous experimentation in those previously ignorant of this activity, is unknown. Some bondage literature reportedly contains warnings about the dangers of asphyxiation and suggestions about "safe" asphyxial practices [2]. A case was reported of a man who died an autoerotic asphyxial death with information in his possession from journalistic publications about the dangers of sexual asphyxiation [4].

Estimates of the frequency of autoerotic asphyxial deaths in the United States range from 50 to 1000 cases per year [2]. We would be interested in hearing from other medical examiners and coroners about any autoerotic deaths the week immediately following the 11 May 1988 broadcast of the television program.

References

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