

Letter to the Editor—A Revisitation of the Most Common Methods of Autoerotic Activity Leading to Death Based on the New Standardized Classification of Asphyxia.

Commentary on: Sauvageau A, Racette S. Autoerotic deaths in the literature from 1954 to 2004: a review. *J Forensic Sci* 2006; 51(1):140–6.

Sir,

In a review paper of 50 years of literature on autoerotic deaths, it was demonstrated that the most common methods of autoerotic activity leading to death are hanging, ligature, plastic bags, chemical substances, or a mixture of these (1). Atypical methods of autoerotic activity on the other hand include electrocution, overdressing/body wrapping, foreign body insertion, and atypical asphyxia (1). This being humbly said, this review study is a key paper on the topic of autoerotic deaths and has been regularly cited since its publication in 2006 (2–15). It should be pointed out however that the recent standardization of the classification of asphyxia (16) now impacts on these conclusions.

Until recently, the classification of asphyxia and the definition of subtypes were far from uniform in the forensic literature (16). This lack of standardization was causing serious problems in the reproducibility of research and the uniformity of practice (16). The classification of asphyxial autoerotic deaths was no exception to this problem. Therefore, a revisitation of the typical methods of autoerotic deaths, based on the standardized classification of asphyxia, seems imperative at this time.

In the standardized classification of asphyxia, ligature strangulation is defined as a form of strangulation in which the pressure on the neck is applied by a constricting band tightened by a force other than the body weight (16). If the pressure on the neck is applied by a constricting band tightened by the gravitational weight of the body or part of the body, the strangulation is classified as hanging (16). A strict application of these definitions changes the list of typical autoerotic methods. Indeed, of the 19 cases compiled in the 50-year review study as autoerotic ligature strangulations, the vast majority should now be re-classified as hanging.

The first group of cases to re-classify (two cases) is the victims that knelt forward with a constricting band attached behind them on a bed post or a door knob. Because of the relative horizontality of the constricting band, these cases were previously classified as ligature strangulation (16,17). With a strict application of the definition of the standardized classification of asphyxia, these cases should now be re-classified as hangings, because, despite the relative horizontality of the ligature, it was still the body weight that tightened the constricting band around the neck.

The second group of cases to re-classify (three cases) is the victims that laid down on their abdomen and tied their ankles or feet to their neck. These cases were previously classified as ligature strangulation (16,18). However, the asphyxia is caused by a constriction of the ligature around the neck by the weight of the legs, and therefore, this is also a type of hanging. The fact that at some point, there is a voluntarily movement made to create the asphyxia is irrelevant: the victim stepping from a stool to hang has also made a voluntarily movement, and no one will contest that this is nevertheless a hanging. Furthermore, the voluntary movement causing the initial compression of the neck ceases after the loss of consciousness; if the weight of the legs was not at work to maintain the neck compression, death would not ensue and the victim would regain consciousness.

After a critical review of all the previous cases classified as autoerotic ligature strangulation in the 50-year review study, only two cases are maintained as autoerotic ligature strangulation activity leading to death (19,20). Therefore, it should no longer be said that ligature strangulation is a typical autoerotic method.

From now on, based on the standardized classification of asphyxia, it would be more appropriate to claim that typical autoerotic methods are hanging, plastic bag, chemical substances, or a mixture of these. Ligature strangulation should be considered an atypical asphyxia method, along with chest compression, inverted/abdominal suspension, and immersion/drowning.

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