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AUTOEROTIC DEATH IN A TRANSVESTITE: AN ACCIDENT OR SUICIDE?

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ABSTRACT

Volatile substance abuse and autoerotic behaviour are distinct phenomenon. Still considerable overlap is observed in some cases. Autoerotic deaths in transvestite are reported in young males, who tend to experiment alone and are heterosexual. We present a rare case of an autoerotic death involving a fatal combination of plastic bag asphyxia, and, intoxication with inhaled toluene whitener and alcohol. Of note in this case is the fact that the victim was a male with transvestite attire. Toluene and alcohol are known to have additive effects. Furthermore, toluene inhalation may induce cardiac arrhythmias, particularly aggravated by high sympathetic activity during autoerotic ritual. We discuss the death scene investigation, past use of lethal and nonlethal paraphilia, and, findings at autopsy in arriving at conclusion of accidental mode of death.

Key words: glue sniffing, autoerotic activity, asphyxiophilia.

INTRODUCTION

Autoeroticism represents deviant sexual behaviour (paraphilia) that seeks sexual gratification by means of manipulations with the own body. Different practices of autoeroticism are known like asphyxiophilia, anesthesiophilia, and electrophilia.¹ Most common methods of asphyxiophilia are, plastic bag asphyxia, strangulation, etc, while various methods used for anesthesiophilia may be inhalation of nitrous oxide, gasoline, propane, aerosols like toluene, etc.² The usual method of abuse is for a quantity of the solvent or other chemical to be placed in a plastic bag. The warmth of the hand holding the bag, as well as the warm breath, encourages vaporization of the solvent, which enters the tidal air stream and is absorbed through the pulmonary membranes into the

blood.³ Accidental deaths are occasionally reported due to such practises.

Transvestism is described as the wearing of clothes of the opposite sex for sexual purposes. It is seen in both sexes. There are two types of transvestite, a heterosexual group and a group with strong homosexual tendencies. The homosexual male transvestite tends to wear clothes which caricature and mock women. The heterosexual male transvestite wears conventional female clothing and unresolved problems in his marriage or other heterosexual relationships are often evident.⁴

Case history

In the present case, the victim, a student of IInd MBBS in a Private Medical College was found in his room which was locked from inside with no response to repeated loud door knocks. When

his friend forcibly broke open the door, they found him dead with female dress and polythene bag over his face. At the scene of incidence they were surprised to see multiple bottles of Camlin whitener eraser along with empty bottles of alcohol and smoked bits of cigarette [Fig 1].

Police were immediately intimated and body shifted for medicolegal autopsy. At autopsy, on external examination, it was a body of an adult male moderately built and well nourished. He was in transvestite attire in the form of pink sari, blouse, petticoat and ladies underwear [Fig 2]. Polythene bag covering the face was smeared from inside with whitish colloid substance having turpentine like smell. Whitish slightly blood tinged froth was collected around his mouth. Rigor present partly in the upper limbs and well marked in lower limbs. Post mortem lividity was fixed over back of the trunk. Sub-conjunctival haemorrhages were noted with petechial haemorrhages around the eyes. Nail beds were bluish discoloured. Dried seminal fluid was present around glans penis and inner aspect of thigh. Turpentine like smell was emanating from the body. On internal examination, Petechial haemorrhages were present over pleura and epicardium. Generalized visceral congestion was noted. Stomach contained semi digested unrecognized food particles (250 ml.), congested and haemorrhagic mucosa with peculiar spirit like smell.

Chemical analysis

All the articles were collected immediately packed in nylon bag and preserved for chemical analysis.

1. Organic solvent Toluene was detected in Camlin Dilutor (fluid) bottle and polythene (covering the face).
2. 154mg% of ethyl alcohol was detected in stomach and intestines contents, 117mg% ethyl alcohol in liver, spleen and kidney, 85mg% of ethyl alcohol was detected in blood, brain and lungs.

Retrospective detailed interview of deceased friends revealed that deceased was addicted to toluene inhalation, with whitener as a means of it. He used to practise it alone since last 6 to 8 months. . However, he was not known to be a homosexual or suffering from depressive disorder. Overtly, there was no history suggestive of his transvestite perversion.

DISCUSSION

Autoerotic deaths can be classified into- Typical and Atypical depending on the presence or absence of accompanying non-lethal paraphilia. Lethal paraphilia may be in the form of compression around the neck, restrictive bondage, plastic bag asphyxia, chest compression, inhalation of volatile substances, insertion of objects in genitals, stimulation of genitals by low voltage electricity. While non lethal paraphilia are fetishism, transvestism, usage of mirror, pornography, etc. An autoerotic death may be diagnosed if it is solitary, accidental, and caused by any lethal paraphilia.⁴ Volatile substance abuse and autoerotic behaviour are distinct phenomenon. Still considerable overlap is observed in 8% of cases reported by Anderson HR.⁵ Autoerotic deaths in transvestite are reported in young males.^{6, 7} Adolescents tend to experiment alone and are heterosexual. On the other hand, adults often practice sexual asphyxia in pairs and are primarily homosexual in orientation. Clearly, the "sole-practitioner" in the adolescent population is at high risk for accidental death due to the lack of supervision by a sex partner.⁸

In the present case, the victim was known to have practised toluene inhalation for euphoric effects on many occasions, either alone or with his friends. On the fateful day, he used a plastic bag and toluene inhalation for inducing autoerotic asphyxia, both being lethal paraphilia. He was wearing transvestite female attire reflecting non-lethal paraphilia. He was not known to have homosexual behaviour.

Paraphilia are associated with alcoholism, which was more than average for general population.⁹ Alcohol has varied physiological effects in presence of toluene. Toluene is an aromatic petrol hydrocarbon used widely in industry as a solvent and thinner for whitener. Euphoric effect of alcohol and toluene show additive effect and lasts longer.¹⁰ Impaired judgement and increased sexual desire are effects of alcohol at higher BAC levels. This may further lead the victim to overindulge in inhalation of volatile solvent for autoerotic purpose which may reach fatal levels. Volatile substances sensitise the heart to the effects of sympathetic stimulation which may occur during sudden exercise and other activities.⁵ It is relevant, like in present case, that amongst the deaths from autoerotic activity along with abuse of volatile substances, cardiac arrhythmia is the most likely cause of death. Like other volatile substances, Toluene is quickly eliminated from the body, so tests for qualitative and quantitative analysis are only useful if they are done very soon after exposure. The unknown factor is usually of 'tolerance' and there is no method of assessing this at autopsy. Determining the manner of death has always been a challenge for Forensic experts and investigating agency. Different views may be present about deaths with substance abuse. Death may not be considered accidental since addict may foresee the risk and deliberately takes the drug knowing that he risked the death. It may be considered as accidental as being inadvertent death due to self administration of drug for purpose of euphoria.¹¹ Manner of death can be inferred by various circumstances like location, attire, sexual paraphernalia, evidence of previous experience, and lack of suicide note.⁸ In the present case, suicidal manner was unlikely because victim was not known to suffer from any premorbid psyche and no suicide note was found near the body. Victim was practising toluene inhalation for more than 6 months, female attire, co-intoxication by alcohol and

absence of rescue help due to secluded place corroborated to manner of death as accident.

Though sporadically reported in newspapers, magnitude of deaths due to autoerotic deaths, particularly in sexually perverts like in transvestism is highly unaddressed. There are several limitations in the data concerning autoerotic asphyxiation. Difficulty in ascertaining the number of practitioners of asphyxiophilia due to the social stigma, lack of statistics available in the Indian literature, relatives often hide the evidence of asphyxiophilic deaths due to the negative societal perception and finally, there is no specific category in the ICD codes for deaths by sexual asphyxiation, hence, these deaths may be misclassified as accidents, suicides, or homicides. As a result, there is probably an underestimation of the rate of death by sexual asphyxiation in Indian setup. We highlight importance of positive interpretation of autoerotic death with regards to death scene circumstantial evidence, past history of lethal and non-lethal paraphilia and autopsy findings in determining manner of death.

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Fig 1: Multiple bottles of Camlin whitener eraser along with empty bottles of alcohol and smoked bits of cigarette seen at scene of occurrence.



Fig 2: Deceased in a transvestite attire with blood tinged froth from the mouth (plastic bag was removed from the face before the police arrived)