

Death by Homicidal Smothering Using Hot Steam Towel: A Case Report

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An unusual case of homicide of a 21-year-old man who was smothered with a hot steam towel by his mother and a pastoress in the name of exorcism. Homicidal smothering in adults is rare, but does occur when the victims are not capable of defending themselves in situations such as chronic illness, old age, drug intoxication or when restrained by other people. In this case, distinct facial scalding was a clue to smothering with a hot steam towel.

Key Words : Smothering, Homicide, Exorcism, Towel, Adult

Introduction

Smothering is a forensic trap because it leaves few or minor injuries on autopsy finding.¹⁾ Manners of death upon smothering are variable, but it is not commonly occurred in homicide unless the victims are very young, very old, debilitated, or incapacitated by restraints, disease or drugs.¹⁾ Here we report a very unique and impressive case of smothering using hot

steam towel with distinct scalding mark on victim's face.

Case Description

A 21-year-old man was found dead in the living room of the false religion church. The days before death, he presented acute psychotic symptoms with aggressive behavior, then his mother brought him to false religion church which was owned by a pastoress

who was familiar with her. According to the testimony of perpetrators (his own mother and pastress) and another witness at the scene, his mother and pastress thought he was possessed by a demon, so they attempted an exorcism. They didn't give him any food or fluids for three days, one of them got on the deceased's abdomen and the others restrained him by holding his extremities, they push down and hit the deceased's eyes and mouth by hands. Finally they covered his full face with hot steam towel and they pressed his face down and smothered him.

Postmortem examination revealed that the deceased was of average height but thin in build (175 cm in height and 57 kg in weight). The face of the deceased showed extensive scalding with drying (Fig. 1). The

buccal region showed severe thermal damages, while both orbital regions, philtrum, perioral region were relatively saved. A few abrasions were seen on the forehead. Both eyes showed multifocal scleral hemorrhages. There were mucosal injuries in the buccal region (Fig. 2). Several minor injuries including abrasions and superficial contusions were present on the anterior neck, occipital region, thorax, abdomen and both extremities, probably due to struggle. On internal examination, there were no specific findings in internal organs except for mucosal edema of the pharynx (Fig. 3). Other pre-existing illnesses were not identified. The toxicologic test was negative. The postmortem biochemistry of vitreous humor showed elevated BUN (99.9 mg/dL) and creatinine (3.5 mg/dL).

Discussion

Asphyxia by smothering is caused by the mechanical obstruction or occlusion of the external airways, i.e., the nose and mouth. Deaths such as these are usually either homicide or suicide, very rarely accident.¹⁾ Suicidal smothering is usually found in using plastic bags.^{2, 3)} Other methods are used in suicide, albeit rarely, include pillow without assisted manner in psychiatric patient or multiple loops of adhesive gummed tape such as in a 66-year-old man.⁴⁾ Homicidal smothering is usually occur in infanticide, but it is possible to smother adult when she or he is



Fig. 1. Scalding injuries with a few abrasions on the forehead of the deceased's face.



Fig. 2. A few petechiae, and mucosal injuries in the buccal region of the deceased.



Fig. 3. Mucosal edema in the pharynx of the deceased.

old and weak, has a psychiatric disease, or restrained or incapacitated by drinks or drugs.^{1, 6, 7)} A recent study shows that a higher variability of manner of death was revealed between cases but homicides are occupied 20.7% in total smothering cases.⁸⁾

Smothering is difficult to diagnose because the trace is very subtle and external injuries are minor. Indicative findings comprise injuries like bruise on the lip and gums, bruises around or a part of the neck, pressure marks at the back of the neck, upper chest and arms, nail marks around face and neck, and foreign materials stuffed into nose and throat on the one hand, very fine petechiae of the face, especially the eyelid.⁹⁾ The crime scene investigation is helpful, but the forensic system in Korea is not yet comprehensive enough. A study indicated that the importance of evidence using microscopic fiber examination of a tracheobronchial lavage is emphasized as a way to diagnose for smothering.¹⁰⁾

In the case presented here, the deceased showed acute psychotic symptom, was dehydrated due to fast continuously for three days. It was presumed that the elevated BUN and creatinine levels were caused by dehydration due to renal functional disturbance like acute renal failure. He was exhausted due to restraint and repetitively assaulted in the name of exorcism. He was smothered fatally for approximately 15 minutes using hot steam towel for intermittent period. The hot steam towel was too close on skin of the face, and it can easily obstruct mouth and nose with the same mechanism of plastic bag. The distinct mark of

scalding on the face and a few abrasions on both temporal areas is impressive and unique pattern of smothering using hot steam towel in this case. It is very rare that an adult male is smothered using hot steam towel and it is first case reported in the literature as we know.

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