



Case Report

Flies solve dowry death mystery: A case report

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Abstract

Unnatural deaths of married women amongst the total female deaths have shown an increasing trend in Indian society during the recent years. These unnatural deaths may be suicidal, homicidal or accidental but suicidal deaths are most common. In India, dowry is a persistent evil, even among educated societies, there is no escape from the brutality of in-laws if expectations are not met and some of these oppressed young women choose to commit suicide, either by burning, poisoning or by some other means. The burden of finding the cause of death lies on the shoulders of forensic experts. In this peculiar case, history and findings were confusing and inconclusive. Then as the ray of hope, flies of autopsy room came to teach us importance of patient observation in Forensic Medicine.

Key words

Dowry deaths, Organophosphorus poisoning, Suicide, Flies.

Introduction

The bestowing of dowries is an ancient tradition. Unlike the Western concept of a single “bride payment”, the Indian tradition consists of an ongoing series of gifts both before and after the marriage to appease the husband and his family. In Western culture, a young married couple establishes their own home with both partners contributing to the welfare of their new

“family”, while in India, the husband’s family takes in the bride, adding financial burden to the extended family living arrangements. When the dowry demands are not met, husbands and in-laws render significant mental and physical harassment on the young brides in effort to encourage her family to fulfill their dowry obligations and even kill the young bride [1]. Dowry deaths are defined as deaths of young



women who are murdered or driven to suicide by continuous harassment and torture by husbands and in-laws in an effort to extort an increased dowry. India has by far the highest number of dowry related deaths in the world according to Indian National Crime Record Bureau. Most dowry deaths occur when the young woman, unable to bear the harassment and torture, commits suicide. Most of these suicides are by hanging, poisoning or by fire. In dowry deaths, the groom's family is the perpetrator of murder or suicide [2]. Poisoning by pesticides is very common in our country. Suicide rates in India have been reported to be high [2, 3, 4, 5], with 1741 suicides documented in a population of about 100 000 from 1986 to 2005 where hanging (804 of 1741, 46.2%) and poisoning (746 of 1741, 42.8%) were the methods most commonly employed. Detailed analysis of the data from 2001 to 2005 revealed that 68% of the fatal episodes of self-poisoning were a result of ingestion of pesticides [6]. Self-poisoning with pesticides is a significant public health problem in low- and middle-income countries like India.

Deaths related to dowries or "dowry deaths" has been described under section 304-B of Indian Penal Code as:

- When the death of a woman is caused by any burns or other bodily injury, or occurs other than under normal circumstances, within seven years of her marriage, and it is shown that soon before her death she was subjected to cruelty or harassment by her husband or by any relative of her husband's for, or in connection with, any demand for dowry, such deaths will be deemed "dowry death" and her husband or relative will be deemed to have caused her death.
- Whoever commits dowry deaths shall be punished by imprisonment for no less

than seven years, but which may extend to life imprisonment.

In dowry death cases, a magistrate inquest is undertaken and the burden of proof lies on plaintiff. The national crime Record Bureau says that there were over 6000 dowry-related deaths every year. There was also surge in dowry related deaths i.e. from 400 a year in 1980s to 6000 a year in 1990s [7]. Most of the victims reached hospital too late, when the poison had already been absorbed and thus many died within 24 hours. If patients reached the hospital in time, they did not necessarily receive proper treatment because of lack of adequate facilities at the PHC level hospital. Most of the incidents occurred during morning hour or midday hour perhaps because of increased tensions and problems at these times. The survival period of within 24 hours in 94.25% of fatalities was reported in study conducted at Rohtak [8].

Case report

History

A dead body of 30 years old married female, hailing from a village of Haryana, was brought to department of Forensic Medicine, PGIMS, Rohtak, for post-mortem examination. The deceased was brought to the emergency department for treatment but was declared dead on arrival. As per police information the apparent cause of death was "By putting pressure over mouth by pillow or force poisoning".

Gross examination

The dead body was wrapped in a polythene sheet. It was wearing white suit, salwar, bangles in right wrist, bracelet in left wrist and a hair band loosely present in hairs. Rigor mortis was present in passing off phase. Post mortem staining was present over the dependent parts of the body except at areas of contact and it was fixed. Reddish colored secretions were oozing



out of nostrils. Blood vessels of shoulder, upper chest and bilateral inguinal region showed marbled appearance. A greenish discoloration was present over the right lower abdominal region.

A reddish grazed abrasion of size 2x3 cm, over the lateral aspect of right maleolus was the only injury present over the body.

On dissection

The brain was congested. Thorax wall, ribs, cartilages, larynx, trachea were healthy and hyoid was intact. Both the lungs were congested on cut section. Heart and large blood vessels were healthy. Stomach contained about 100 ml greenish-gray colored viscous fluid with a spirituous disagreeable odor. Mucosa was hyperemic with patchy hemorrhages. **(Photo – 1)** Upper part of small intestine showed mucosal hyperemia. Large intestine contained fecal matter and gases. Liver, spleen and kidneys were congested on cut section. Urinary bladder was empty. Uterus was empty.

Photo – 1: Hemorrhagic spots on stomach mucosa along with grey discoloration.



While post mortem examination of this body was going on, our colleagues were doing another post mortem examination of a decomposed body in same examination room. As the decomposed body had been invaded with

green-bottle flies and maggots, when the decomposed body was cleaned for dissection flies started settling over dissected body on our table and started feeding over the body and body secretions. But to our surprise when we tried to remove these flies from this body they did not move and within minutes started collapsing and dying over the dissected body. **(Photo – 2, Photo – 3)** There was no scientific explanation for this baffling incidence until we received the chemical analysis report of viscera we had sent to Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL).

Photo – 2: Dead flies over dissected viscera.

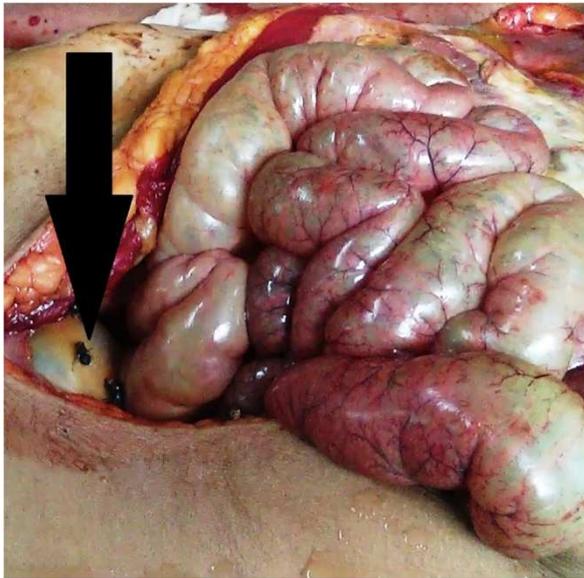


Discussion

The finding of post-mortem examination did not indicate the manner of death suggested by police or alleged by next of kin of deceased. Sudden death of flies over the body viscera indicated that something toxic was present in the body causing death of these flies and this poison must be in sufficient concentration to kill the flies instantaneously hence, most probably an insecticide. Chemical examiner’s report confirmed our observations, which stated that Organophosphorus insecticide was detected in all the preserved viscera. The case alleged to be a brutal homicide turned out a case of suicidal poisoning just with a vigilant eye.



Photo – 3: Dead flies over dissected viscera.



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