

Dark death – an interesting case report

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Abstract

Suicide (Latin *suicidium*, from *suicaedere*, "to kill oneself") is the act of intentionally causing one's own death. Suicide is often committed out of despair, the cause of which is frequently attributed to a mental disorder such as depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, alcoholism, or drug abuse. The act of taking one's life for the benefit of others is known as altruistic suicide. Literature has very less reference regarding the suicidal approach among blind persons.

Here we report an interesting case of a teenage boy who was suffering from bilateral Heredo-macular degeneration and was completely blind from birth. He committed suicide by hanging, in his living room. The method by which he chose to end his life raised many eyebrows. Here, we unfold the story of this teenager who ended his life for the benefit of his family members.

Keywords: Suicide, blind person, hanging.

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Introduction

An estimated 180 million people worldwide are visually disabled, of whom nearly 45 million are blind, and among these, four out of five live in developing countries. Prevalence varies between countries, from 0.2% or less in developed countries to more than 1% in some sub-Saharan countries¹. In India, blindness is one of the most significant social problems. The principle cause of blindness in India is cataract, responsible for about 62.6% of all cases².

Stargardt disease (also referred to as fundus flavimaculatus or heredomacular degeneration) is an inherited condition that usually causes gradual bilateral decrease in vision in early childhood or teenage years, which may remain stable for the rest

of life. This progressive vision loss usually reaches to the point of legal blindness³. Several genes (STGD1, STGD3 and STGD4) are associated with this disorder. The main symptom of Stargardt disease is loss of visual acuity. Vision is most noticeably impaired when the macula is damaged. No treatment is available for Stargardt's disease as of now^{3,4}.

Case details

A case was brought to the Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, Sapthagiri Institute of Medical Sciences and Research Centre on 03/03/2014. As per the police Inquest, a 17yr old boy was found dead in his living room on 02/03/2014. The boy was blind since birth.

Autopsy findings: Externally, an oblique incomplete faint Ligature mark measuring 21cm × 4.5cm (Fig 1). Dry salivary stains present along the right angle of the mouth. Other features of hanging were present.



Fig 1: Ligature mark



Fig 2: Ligature material

Ligature material: As furnished by the police, the ligature material is a blue and cream coloured floral design synthetic saree with multiple knots at different levels (Fig 2). On twisting, it corresponds to the ligature mark and can withstand the weight of the body.

Internally, the structures underneath the ligature mark were pale and glistening (Fig 3). Hyoid bone & thyroid cartilage were intact.

Respiratory System: Both lungs were enlarged and congested. Surface showed petechiae. Cut section exuded dark red fluid.

Cardio-vascular system: Petechiae present over the surface. Coronaries intact.

Hepato-biliary & uro-genital systems were normal.

Cranial cavity was intact with petechiae in the white matter of the Brain.

FSL Report(FSL / TS / 843 / 2014): Residues of Volatile poisons, Pesticides, Barbiturates, Benzodiazepine group of drugs, Toxic metal ions and anions were not detected in any of the above stated articles.

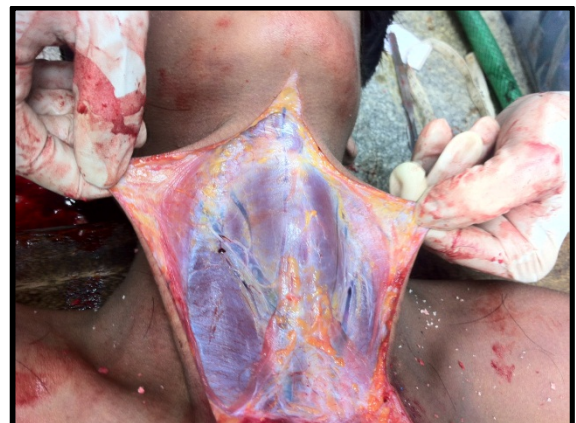


Fig 3: Structures underneath the ligature mark.

Histo-Pathological Report (M.L.C A - 5/14): Kidney showed features of Congestion. Brain, Lungs, Heart, Coronaries, Liver, Spleen were Unremarkable.

Cause of Death: On perusal of Autopsy Findings, Histopathology Report and F.S.L Report, Opinion as to the cause of death was due to Asphyxia as a result of Hanging.

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE IN RESPECT OF PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED	
Certified that I have this day examined the applicant whose particulars are given below, and that he/she does not fall within the definition of physically handicapped as mentioned in the Government order No. SWK. 149 P.H.P. 77 Date 7-11-1977	
1. a) Name of Candidate	
b) Father's Name	
c) Surname, if any	
2. Sex	male
3. Approximate age	14
4. Identification marks	mark on rt side of neck
5. Onset of blindness/deaf	Birth 100% Stereotyped disease.
6. Nature of disability (ortho)	
a) Give the name of defective to enable Government of Karnataka to clearly understand the nature and extent of the disability	
Signature of the Candidate	
Signature of the Doctor	
Date: 18/1/10	
Note: Please state whether blindness is from birth or acquired later: if it has been caused afterwards the age and cause of blindness may indicate for purpose of this maintenance allowance the blind are those who suffer from either of the following.	

Fig 4: Certificate showing blindness

Discussion

Information from family and friends revealed that,

- ❖ The deceased was completely blind from birth (Fig 4).
- ❖ He had passed S.S.L.C(10th Std) with 71.68%.
- ❖ He used to tell his friends that if he committed suicide, his family would be given a lot of financial support by the Government.
- ❖ He had attempted to hang himself several times in the room in which he was staying.

Here, though the boy was completely blind from birth, he had an orientation towards society due to his primary schooling. Since the boy always stayed in a small room, he knew every single detail about the room. He had attempted to hang himself several times before this final act. Since he was getting financial allowances from the government, he used to tell his friends that if he committed suicide, his family would receive a lump sum amount of money as compensation from the government and they would be free from financial hurdles in the future. Hence this type has been termed 'Altruistic suicide'. In a comparative study of two populations of young males with sensory deprivation, for instance, Abolfotouh and Telmesani reported depressive symptoms to be more common among the blind than the deaf⁵. Authors such as Cholden⁶, Blank⁷ and Shulz⁸ have linked the response to blindness, to a grief reaction, in which patients mourn the loss of the sight of self. In some cases, this reaction is complicated to the point of precipitating suicide. Very few literatures are there regarding completely blind people committing suicide by hanging. An article in Modern Ghana newspaper⁹ reported that a 56-year-old blind man who was being ejected from his rented apartment, apparently for his inability to settle his rent, allegedly committed suicide by hanging at Official Town, a suburb of Ashaiman⁹. An article in mailonline⁶ reported that, a deaf and blind man, 63, hanged himself in grief, yards from the body of his wife after she died from a heart attack. The person was deaf from birth but eventually developed blindness later after suffering from

worsening tunnel vision. He had attempted to hang himself 24yrs ago after being told that he was going blind¹⁰.

Conclusion

Seeing the surrounding world is undoubtedly a wonderful experience. One cannot imagine a world without vision. The present case clearly stresses the need for greater sensitization to the problem, together with the establishment of guidelines for preventing the onset of secondary depression and suicidal behavior in blind persons.

Conflict of interest

None declared

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