



Pathology Biology Section – 2003

G61 Body Found in the Waterway of Lille— Accident, Suicide, or Homicide?

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The authors report the case of a man found in a waterway and discuss the differential diagnosis for bodies found in water. These data are compared to those of the literature.

History: On June 20, 2002, a 42-year-old man is found floating face down in the waterway of Lille, France. At 8:00 p.m., a forensic pathologist performs a first examination at the edge of the waterway. He observes several wounds on the face with fracture to the skull and a periorbital bruise. The lesions are recent and could be attributed to a boat's propellers. This waterway is used as a barge crossing. There is a large brown bruise at right thoracic area. There is no suicide letter found and the man has no history of depression. An Autopsy is performed the next day and time of the death is estimated during preceding night.

Autopsy findings: The cadaver is not putrefied and is easily identified. The lesions on the face are not parallel. Some are small and blood flows out the wounds. The lesions have vital characteristics. Two hypotheses are considered: 1) the barge's propellers created the face lesions while he was still alive or 2) he was thrown in the waterway dead. The skull examination confirmed the second hypothesis. The brain was contuse with lesions. A round wound is observed. An entrance wound is present on the right temporal area and an exit wound is seen on left parietal area. This case was classified as a homicide. On X-Ray, no foreign bodies are found. All lesions on the face were penetrating. The cause of death is a hemorrhage of the brain with bruises. After investigation by the police, the aggressor was found. He is a 40-year-old man. He reported that he used a large tool to strike the decedent in the head and face in a garage.

Discussion: A body recovered from water presents many challenges to the forensic pathologist. Drowning is a diagnosis based upon the circumstances surrounding the death with exclusion of other causes of death. Often, identification of subjects is complicated by decomposition. As in this case, the determination of cause and manner of death can be a daunting challenge. Moreover, many of the essential questions surrounding water deaths are answered after performing an autopsy. Was the individual alive prior to entering water is the essential question. This case is a good illustration. The diagnosis of drowning is one of exclusion. Most of drowning deaths are accidental. This case was compared to suicides by drowning. The characteristics are studied to point out the difference between homicide and suicide during the crime scene investigation. The importance of crime scene investigations is reviewed. This case illustrates the difficulties in obtaining forensic evidence to conclude a homicide or suicide. Characteristics of skull bones lesions were compared to discover the important time of immersion with lesions as in this case. The characteristics of these lesions are important to when reviewing a subject without putrefactive changes.

Homicide, Drowning, Autopsy