



Pathology & Biology Section – 2004

G28 Hmong Cultural Aversion to Forensic Autopsy: Bridging Communication and Cultural Barrier

Thomas K. Resk, MD*, PO Box 3215, Chico, CA 95927-3215; Thomas A. Rudd, MD, PO Box 332, Highwood, IL 60040-0332

The goal of this presentation is to share with the forensic community practical experience in communication methods, including the use of community public radio broadcasting, to both increase understanding of the autopsy and to lessen cultural resistance to forensic autopsy among the Hmong cultural community in the USA.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by increasing understanding and acceptance of the forensic autopsy by Hmong people as an instrument of “good” for the entire community as well as greater sensitivity by the forensic community to the culture of the Hmong and their desired treatment of the dead.

This poster presents the work of the authors and a dedicated group of Hmong who addressed a series of cultural problems discovered during the course of a routine forensic autopsy performed on an Hmong elderly woman, a member of one of the five Hmong clans living in Butte County, located in northern California. After resolution of the cultural issues of this individual clan member, the scope of our work was expanded to examine cultural objections to autopsy by all eighteen clans which compose the some 300,000 Hmong currently residing in the United States. Over several months a series of meetings to identify Hmong cultural/religious objections to autopsy were held among members of the Hmong community, the Butte County Chief Deputy Coroner, and the county forensic pathologist. Given deeper insight, understanding, and sensitivity to the Hmong cultural aversion to autopsy examination, a number of mitigating steps were initiated by the Butte County Sheriff-Coroner and forensic pathologist which assured surviving Hmong relatives that the spirit of their deceased family member could enter the after-life with minimal negative cultural consequences for the decedent. The risk of the decedent's spirit returning to haunt surviving relatives because of the perceived failure of the relatives to prevent autopsy, a palpable fear among the relatives, was also eliminated. At the same time the requirements of the law necessitating forensic autopsy were also upheld.

Mitigating steps initiated included:

(1) Performing a full autopsy only when absolutely necessary.

(2) When a decedent coming to forensic autopsy was known, or suspected, to be Hmong, the next-of-kin was contacted by the forensic pathologist to inform them that an autopsy would be done and for what purpose. An offer for the family to elect a family member, or family representative, to ‘talk’ to the spirit of the dead person prior to autopsy in the presence of the body was proffered. Because of the Hmong belief that the spirit resides in the dead body, it is believed possible to communicate to the person's spirit after death. The purpose in talking to the dead body was to relate why an autopsy had to be done for which the family members bore no responsibility. Currently, a native Hmong-speaking liaison between the Hmong community and the Coroner's Office is being sought to replace the time consuming contact role of the forensic pathologist.

(3) Replace all organs back into the body after autopsy.

(4) Allow no metallic foreign items to be left in the body after autopsy.

Delay performing the autopsy until appropriate family ritual arrangements could be made.

Recognizing that the Hmong cultural aversion to autopsy affected not only the local community but also the broader Hmong community throughout the United States, a one hour long radio program titled, “Forensic autopsy and the Hmong” was carefully scripted employing very simple Hmong terms to explain medical terms totally foreign to the Hmong language. The radio program was broadcast over a local

northern California Community Public Radio station, FM 90.1 KZFR – Chico, with an estimated local listening audience of 4,000 Hmong. The radio program was recorded, burned to CD, and redistributed throughout the United States to numerous Hmong Cultural Centers as well as forensic pathologists who expressed an interest through the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) internet-based computer listserve.

A conservative estimate is that tens of thousands of Hmong listeners will ultimately be exposed to this radio program.

Hmong Culture, Autopsy Resistance, Radio Broadcast