



D24 An Unusual Death by Suffocation With a Plastic Bag: How a Motion Picture Can Help to Make the Distinction Between Homicide and Suicide

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the circumstances of an unusual suicide. The suicide is discussed to reduce the potential for mistakes in such cases in which it may be difficult to establish whether suicide or homicide occurred.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating that manner and cause of death could be determined only by a thorough analysis of the physical and circumstantial evidence available to the medicolegal team.

Introduction: Asphyxia by smothering involves the mechanical obstruction of mouth and nose. Asphyxial deaths due to plastic bags may result from accidents, suicides, or homicides, although suicides seem to predominate.

Case report: A 32-year old married truck driver was found dead by the police lying in the fetal position in his truck on a desert street. The head was enclosed in a large clear plastic bag with its open end fixed to the neck with a rope. The wrists were firmly tied by a rope and the man was fully dressed in his usual daytime clothes. The doors were locked from the inside. There was no evidence of violence, and neither pornographic material nor autoerotic paraphernalia was found. A DVD was found in the glove compartment ("The life of David Gale", a 2003 motion picture directed by Alan Parker). A remarkable cyanosis of the face and lips, and subconjunctival petechial hemorrhages were noted. A medicolegal autopsy was ordered by the public prosecutor's department. The external examination was unremarkable. The autopsy showed thin hemorrhages in the subcutaneous tissues of the neck and in the lower rectal mucosa. The lungs were congested. No fracture of the hyoid bone or the thyroid cartilage was noted. Swollen glands were located around both sternocleidomastoid muscles. There was no lesion of fight or self defense on the body. The toxicological analysis was negative. The histologic examination of the rectal mucosa showed aspecific abnormalities. A diagnosis of death due to plastic bag asphyxia was made. This was initially treated by the police as homicidal case. The legal inquiry revealed that the man was not known to have attempted suicide before. He had homosexual relationships and had been diagnosed HIV positive two days prior to his death. "The life of David Gale" was seen by the police. In this movie the main character is found lying on her kitchen floor naked, hand-cuffed with a plastic bag over her head. The ending reveals she has committed suicide. Data eventually led to the conclusion that this case had actually been a suicide.

Discussion: In this case, the man had obviously committed suicide using the method he had seen in the movie. He had just learned he suffered from HIV and this should have led him to the revelation of his double life to his wife. Medicolegal data alone would not have determined whether homicide or suicide had occurred in this case. It is very infrequent in France to establish the manner of death thanks to seeing a motion picture.

Asphyxia, Suffocation, Plastic Bag