



Pathology & Biology Section – 2008

G31 Lethal Neglect: A Case of Extreme Intrafamilial Child Torture

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have an understanding of some peculiar aspects of intrafamilial child neglect ending in death from starvation.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by providing forensic evaluation of lethal child neglect as a consequence of combining forms of malnutrition, maltreatments, and psychological abuse levied by parents.

Deliberate starvation of an infant/child is a severe and rare form of child abuse, especially in industrialized countries. The goal of this presentation is to highlight the importance of forensic assessment in complex cases of child homicide.

Child neglect can be defined as the failure of a caregiver to provide a child with the necessities of life, including physical safety and protection, food, hydration, clothing, shelter and medical care. Failure to fulfil these responsibilities may constitute active or passive neglect. Forensic investigation of lethal child neglect requires complete autopsy findings, full investigation of scene and case history, past medical records, family history, and social background.

This presentation reports a case concerning a female infant aged 16 months who was brought to the Emergency Department where physicians established she was already dead. They noted the child cachectic state and multiple bruises over the whole body. The child's mother stated she had not been eating well in the last week.

Autopsy showed the child weighed 5700 grams (12.6 pounds) for a length of 76 cm (29.9 inches); she was severely dehydrated with the muscles of head, face, trunk, lower and upper extremities flaccid, redundant, wrinkled skin, and resultant prominent bones. The orbital adipose tissue was essentially absent leaving sunken appearing eyes. Examination of the head revealed multiple abrasions and ecchymoses at varying healing stages and focal alopecia.

Multiple cutting stab wounds were present on the left auricle and on the neck. There were bruises located on the chest and on the upper extremities; radiographic examination revealed fracture of left forearm overlaying an old arm contusion. Decubitus ulcers were located on the lumbar area and pelvis.

The thymus had atrophied. The stomach and large intestine were empty and exhibited some ulcerative lesions; there was a very little stool in the rectum. The weights of most of the child's organs were markedly less than normal averages.

Microscopic findings showed acute bronchopneumonia, hepatic fibrosis and no glycogen in the liver on PAS (para-amino-salicylic acid) stain.

The child lived in a reconstituted family. The mother had two children from the first marriage and another one from the present husband. The victim was conceived during a brief affair between the mother and a man who left her soon after she got pregnant.

The other children were healthy and well nourished.

Home inspection revealed the victim spent all day sitting in a stroller located in the parents' bedroom and placed in front of the wall.

The parents confessed they fed her intermittently with water and sugar, small portions of milk occasionally adding breadcrumbs. Sometimes she ate leftover food from the other children. When the victim cried because she was hungry, the "caregivers" would beat her or throw objects (biberon, toys, etc.) from their bed at her head. The parents pled guilty and received life sentence.

In cases of malnutrition/starvation, only a complete forensic investigation may reveal that the caregivers history of the child not eating well for a few days, is hiding a case of extreme intrafamilial child abuse.

Starvation, Child Abuse, Parental Rejection