



Pathology & Biology Section – 2008

G95 Death Due to Aquatic Erotic Asphyxia - Accident or Homicide?

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The objective of this presentation is to alert medical examiners, medicolegal investigators and other forensic experts to unusual and potentially deadly forms of erotic asphyxial behavior in an aquatic environment. Our concern is that such behavior can be misconstrued as autoerotic and classified “accident” in the event of a death.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating that aquatic erotic asphyxia is a potentially deadly activity that can be a venue for more sinister activities such as aquatic sexual sadism and child abuse. Since aquatic erotic asphyxia requires the participation of two or more individuals, it should not be confused with autoerotic asphyxia. In the event of a death, a thorough investigation is needed to assign manner of death.

Accidental autoerotic deaths generally occur during solitary sexual activity involving the use of props or other stimulatory devices, when the victim miscalculates or when a safety mechanism or breathing apparatus fails. Some of the mechanisms used to produce cerebral hypoxia include ligatures, plastic bags, body wrapping and submersion in water. Aquatic erotic asphyxia (AEA) a potentially dangerous but less known form of erotic asphyxial behavior, may involve more than one participant, whereby the manner of death is at issue in the event of a death. Illustrative cases and a brief review of the literature will be presented.

AEA and its many subcategories as advertised on the internet with particular attention to the more pernicious forms of the practice such as aquatic sexual sadism and the forceful immersion of children are described. Surprisingly, references to aquatic pedophilia can be found on some of the websites catering to “aquaphiles”. AEA can involve more than one participant in various gender combinations, with one dominant figure dunking or drowning a submissive figure, or with two individuals wrestling under water for dominance. AEA enthusiasts are careful to avoid injury and even post detailed medical questionnaires on their websites. AEA activity sometimes involves the use of actors wearing underwater makeup and props to ensure a safe and controlled environment. Aquatic sadists on the other hand derive pleasure from the dunking-related torture and/or actual drowning of another person, and promote more “realistic” scenarios.

Given that the AEA community is becoming increasingly organized, with personal ad websites, commercially available videos, DVD's and photographs, and even conventions and hosted parties, the authors strongly recommend that the practice be taken into consideration when investigating a death in water. Investigators should search for unusual items such as cinderblocks, cut lengths of rope, large clear plastic tarps, diver weight belts, unusually set-up scuba regulators, large empty fish tanks, and other apparel not usually worn in hot tubs or pools. Evidence suggesting the participation of more than one individual should also be carefully looked for, since the death scene may have been altered or sanitized. The concern is that when aquatic erotic asphyxial activity results in the death of a participant, we may be dealing with homicidal violence and sexual sadism and not accidental autoerotic activity. The fact that death can potentially occur after the person exits the water further underscores the need for a thorough and thoughtful death investigation whenever a drowning is suspected.

Aquatic Erotic Asphyxia, Aquatic Sexual Sadism, Autoerotic Asphyxia