



Pathology Biology Section – 2010

G8 Hanging Deaths in Children: An Investigation of Manner of Death

Julie Adams, DO*, 1234 Big Bend Crossing Drive, Valley Park, MO 63088

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand that investigations into pediatric hanging deaths require a very thorough scene investigation, research into the decedent's psychiatric, medical, and social history, and a complete forensic postmortem examination in order to determine the manner of death. Clearly, the determination of the manner of death in these cases can be controversial and can have a tremendous impact on the child's family. Our research supports the hypothesis that hanging deaths in children aged eight to twelve years of age are less likely to have suicide as the manner of death compared to hanging deaths in those aged thirteen to eighteen years of age.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by helping medical examiners and forensic investigators elucidate information which will help determine the manner of death in these difficult cases.

Background: Suicide in children unfortunately is not an uncommon phenomenon. Suicide is the fourth most common overall cause of death of children aged ten through nineteen years of age in the United States. However, suicide attempts and completions are rare in pre-pubertal children. The rate of suicide deaths increases with increasing age after the onset of puberty.

The number of suicide deaths in the United States for those aged fifteen through nineteen has doubled in the past 40 years, and has tripled for those in the ten to fourteen year age group. However, not all deaths by hanging in children are suicides. Asphyxial "contests" such as the "choking game" have emerged in the past few years as increasing concern with hanging deaths involving children. Additionally, many of the children whose hanging deaths are deemed accidental have histories of attention deficit disorder and impulsive behavior.

Investigations into pediatric hanging deaths require a very thorough scene investigation, research into the decedent's psychiatric, medical, and social history, and a complete forensic postmortem examination in order to determine the manner of death. Clearly, the determination of the manner of death in these cases can be controversial and can have a tremendous impact on the child's family. Our hypothesis is that hanging deaths in children aged eight to twelve years of age are less likely to have suicide as the manner of death compared to hanging deaths in those aged thirteen to eighteen years of age.

Design: Using the medical examiner's computer registry, all hanging deaths from the past ten years involving children aged 18 years of age and younger will be identified. This will include all applicable deaths in St. Louis City and surrounding counties. All the aspects surrounding the deaths, will be analyzed including the decedent's medical, social, and psychiatric history. The results will then be compiled and presented in two groups divided by age, 8-12 and 13-18. Data will then be analyzed to show whether our hypothesis is supported.

Results and Conclusion: These findings support the hypothesis that hanging deaths ultimately ruled suicides in children aged 8-12 years of age is an unusual phenomenon and is more likely to be accidental in nature compared to hanging deaths in children aged 13-18. Since research in this area of hanging deaths in children is lacking, our goal in this retrospective review is to help elucidate information which will help medical examiners determine the manner of death in these cases. Further research will help to illuminate the issues surrounding these deaths and will assist forensic pathologists in determining the manner of death in these cases.

Hanging, Child Deaths, Asphyxial Deaths