



Pathology Biology Section – 2010

G98 Fatal Rescue Burns

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After attending this presentation, attendees will identify with the significance of identification of a rescuer in a case of burns to ascertain if burns are sustained in an effort to save the victim, or trying to commit the crime.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by understanding the need to prevent rescuers from becoming a victim of burn injuries, and the need to identify rescuers for medicolegal implications.

Dowry deaths in India are an investigative challenge and identification of a rescuer can have serious medicolegal implications. A case of fatal rescue burns where a six month pregnant female committed suicide by pouring kerosene and igniting herself will be reported. The father-in-law of the deceased, in trying to rescue her, got entrapped in fire and sustained fatal rescue burns. As per the preliminary investigations into the incident and eyewitnesses account, a young six month pregnant female poured kerosene and set herself ablaze following an argument with the mother-in-law. The father-in-law, in an attempt to rescue her, also sustained burn injuries. Subsequently both were rushed to the district hospital. The female aborted on the 4th day of the incident. The victim (female) and the rescuer (father-in-law) expired later. The pattern of burn injuries in the rescuer and the victim will be presented and the case details of the victims along with body involvement in burns will be discussed.

Self-immolation is a preferred method of suicide in Indian women. The death of married females due to thermal burns that is commonly reported in India is usually associated with the social evil of dowry. A fatal thermal injury in married women in India hence is a major concern for the investigating and law-enforcing authorities. It is a challenging task for the medicolegal experts to discriminate homicidal and suicidal burns in married women and comment on the manner of sustaining injuries in cases relating to dowry disputes. Pattern of distribution of burns in different circumstances have been studied and a difference has been noted in between assault and self-immolation groups as well as between males and females. The issue becomes critical in case of thermal injuries sustained to the relatives and associates of the victim (a young married woman) during such an incident. It is vital to ascertain if burns are sustained in an effort to save the victim or trying to commit the crime.

An unprofessional rescuer of a burn victim is one who tries to save the victim, in spite of the consequences of putting out the fire without any safety precautions. Menezes et al introduced the term "rescue burns" for such thermal injuries as an option to allow easy tracking and identification of such cases. They opined that difference between rescue burns, accidental burns, and suicidal burns can have profound ramifications to the family of the injured or deceased rescuer, or the insurance company concerned in the case, as well as the judiciary. In India, dowry is a tradition; bride burning a social problem, hence cases of thermal burns in newly married females is an investigative challenge and identification of a rescuer can have serious medicolegal implications.

Rescuers, under the influence of emotional distress and with great courage, try to save the victim. Efforts should be made so that a rescuer does not become the next victim. To prevent the rescue burns general public should be educated about precautions to be taken before trying to prevent a victim especially during their early years of life. Identification of the rescuer is vital since it has profound medicolegal implications.

Dowry Deaths, Rescuer, Rescue Burns