



Pathology Biology Section – 2011

G112 Deaths in Unlicensed Alcohol Rehabilitation Facilities

Lawrence Nguyen, MD, Los Angeles County Department of Coroner, 1104 North Mission Road, Los Angeles, CA 90033; and Christopher B. Rogers, MD, Los Angeles County Medical Examiner's Office, 1104 North Mission Road, Los Angeles, CA 90033*

After attending this presentation, attendees will be aware of the risk of death in unlicensed alcohol rehabilitation facilities.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by making pathologists aware of a series of deaths of alcohol abusers in unlicensed facilities, and making the public aware of the risks of alcohol withdrawal without medical intervention.

A series of 17 deaths in alcohol rehabilitation facilities occurred in Los Angeles County between 1996 and 2010. In each an intoxicated Spanish-speaking alcoholic man was dropped off at an alcohol rehabilitation group by his family. The individuals remained at the facilities for varying periods of time and underwent several procedures for detoxification.

Reported treatment methods have included use of restraints, forcing the victim to drink ethanol or isopropanol, restraint with forced ingestion of alcohol, application of onions to the feet, and inserting a spoon in the victim's mouth.

In three cases there was a history of restraint use. Two additional decedents had both ethanol and isopropanol in the blood, although it was unclear whether the isopropanol was given at the facility. The causes of death included alcohol overdose, alcohol withdrawal, hemoperitoneum due to cirrhosis and a ruptured splenic vein, and diabetic ketoacidosis related to chronic pancreatitis. Most cases were closed as accident or natural, although three cases involving restraint were coded homicide. In some cases, other members of the group were charged with involuntary manslaughter and false imprisonment.

The police are familiar with these groups and are able to close the facilities. However, new groups often form at the same addresses, requiring additional police action. Los Angeles County has disseminated a public health warning about these centers and has published a list of 57 alcohol treatment centers using non-medical methods of detoxification. However, it has been difficult to eradicate these groups.

It is recommended that medicolegal death investigators be aware of this information, as similar groups may exist in other areas. **Alcoholism, Investigation, Detoxification**