



G92 A Singular Case of Asphyxia by Choking With a Handkerchief: Accidental Event or Suicide to “Shut-Up” Spirits?

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the importance of integrating circumstantial data, clinical history, and autoptoc results in the differential diagnosis between homicidal, suicidal, or accidental death by choking.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing key information that can help to correctly evaluate rare asphyxia cases.

Suicide accounts for 3% of deaths in the world's population. The SUPRE Project (Suicide Prevention Project - OMS) estimates that from 1950 to 1995 the percentage of deaths by suicide has increased globally by 60% and is currently growing, especially among the younger age groups.

In Italy, every year there are between 3,500 and 4,000 suicides; most of these are made by patients with psychiatric disorders. These numbers rise if a psycho-pathological state is associated with the abuse of substances such as alcohol and drugs. Among the psychiatric disorders, subjects with schizophrenia are particularly at risk.

Individuals with schizophrenia have many basic functions compromised, which include perceiving, thinking, language, emotions, will, initiative, and attention. The impairment is likely to lead to serious problems of adaptation in social or occupational functions, and it influences the decision-making capacity, pushing patients to take extreme acts.

Severe psychotic symptoms, such as delusions or hallucinations, and pathological personality traits, such as impulsivity and excessive suspiciousness, are additional factors that can determine an increase in the number of suicide attempts and in fatality.

Suicide by choking is extremely rare. The case presented appeared remarkable for the way in which it was set in place by the victim, the reasons why the victim attempted suicide, and doubts about the nature of the act.

In January 2010, a 60-year-old woman was found dead in her home with a handkerchief down her throat. The victim had a long-standing history of psychiatric illness (residual chronic schizophrenic psychosis in partially effective neuroleptic treatment). The victim had been under investigation by prosecutors for fraud for selling her services as a “sorceress.” The son also reported previous suicide attempts made by his mother, even in his presence, guided by evil spirits' voices coming from inside her body. In order to “shut-up” the spirits, she tried to suffocate them with her hands or by self garroting with a belt. The external examination of the body showed abundant red wine hypostasis localized on face, neck, and upper chest. Autopsy showed petechiae in visceral pleura and epicardium, and visceral congestion. The absence of the upper left canine and lower left premolar with no traumatic lesions of the labial mucosa was also noted. There was no other sign of internal or external trauma. Internal organ sections showed hemorrhagic infiltration at the soft palate and at the soft tissues of the upper portion of the larynx. The histological examination confirmed multi-organ congestion and subpleural emphysema. Toxicological findings denoted and quantified clozapine overdose with a consumption over three times the prescribed dose (300mg/day).

Suicide by choking is difficult to accomplish and can easily be confused with accidental or homicidal choking. The psychotic factor is an important variable to consider in the suicidal behavior, especially for the hallucinatory component, which most likely induces some patients to perform acts motivated by a distorted view of reality.

In the case presented, there were two possible scenarios, the first in which the patient, suffering from a psychotic delirium characterized by voices coming from inside, decided to end it by suffocating and purposefully placing tissues down the pharynx. In the second scenario, the patient placed a handkerchief in the mouth on the upper left canine to buffer the bleeding, but being under the influence of the clozapine (side effects: drowsiness, mental confusion, agitation, respiratory depression), airways were fatally blocked, causing a violent mechanical asphyxia.

Choking, Clozapine, Handkerchief