



Psychiatry & Behavioral Science Section - 2015

I18 Death Due to Neglect in the Elderly: A Sad Reality

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to describe the impact of forensic science in cases of abandoned elderly people.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the crucial role of social and familial relationships in cases of neglect in the elderly.

In Italy, there are about 12 million people older than 65 years of age. With the continuous rise of life expectancy, the number of elderly citizens is steadily increasing.

A great number of older people live at home alone and many of them are completely abandoned despite poor medical conditions. Thus, it is very common for elderly people to die alone in their homes not having received medical assistance. Frequently, the discovery of the bodies may be several days after death. No one notices their disappearance and the alert is given late, often by neighbors. Consequently, many of the bodies are in an advanced state of decomposition.

At autopsy, the most frequent causes of death are represented by domestic accidents or cardiovascular disease such as myocardial infarction, ictus, or pulmonary embolism. Many of the deaths would be avoidable with an early warning and a timely rescue.

The reports of the autopsies performed at the Institute of Forensic Medicine of Catanzaro were analyzed and the cases of 20 patients who died between 2013 and 2014 were selected. All cases were of elderly people (nursing home patients with nervous system diseases and mental health issues) who were found dead in their own homes or in rural areas after they disappeared from the care facilities. For each case, the following was carried out using the psychological autopsy method: an inspection of records, an autopsy, and an investigation into a family member. Data analysis has highlighted that in every death, the body showed obvious phenomena of putrefaction. In addition, the autopsies revealed that the causes of death were: from cardiac origin (50%), from asphyxia (esophageal food bolus obstruction) (30%), from traumatic causes (15%), and from malnutrition (5%). The background data indicated a complicated family situation in which the elderly person usually lived alone and was not controlled by the family or by the staff of the nursing home in which he was bedridden. For this reason, it was concluded that the data collected during the judicial inspection and those shown by the medical, legal, and psychological autopsy revealed a deep state of abandonment of the elder before death as well as social and family loneliness. Such cases allow the conclusion that there is a real death-by-neglect in the elderly. Therefore, it emphasizes the importance of family and social integration of the population between 60 and 80 years of age in order to: (1) prevent fatal events related to the lack of prevention of curable diseases which, in a state of neglect, are not treated; (2) avoid accidental events related to lack of control of older people with mental disorders and central nervous system patients at nursing homes or hospitals; (3) increase control strategies in nursing homes or hospitals for the mentally ill or for elderly patients with neurological diseases; and, (4) increase levels of social and family integration distributed throughout cities and towns. These incentives will reduce the exponential increase in deaths from neglect in the elderly.

Forensic Science, Elderly, Neglect