ANIL AGGRAWAL'S
Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology
The world's first online journal devoted entirely to forensic medicine and toxicology · Published 1 January and 1 July

VOL. 5, NO. 2 · JULY – DECEMBER 2004
Downloaded from www.anilaggrawal.com · ISSN 0972-8074 (Online) · https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_005_no_002/papers/paper006.html

Controversial Death- Change of Decision from Homicide to Suicide: A Review Opinion

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CITE THIS ARTICLE

Sharma S, Sharma SK. Controversial Death- Change of Decision from Homicide to Suicide: A Review Opinion. *Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* [serial online], 2004; Vol. 5, No. 2 (July – December 2004): [p. 17-20]. Available from: https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_005_no_002/papers/paper006.html

ABSTRACT

If someone wondered how a change in opinion of autopsy could be brought about many months after doing the postmortem, or if they wondered how could the autopsy report be changed without having seen the body, they need only read this case. This is a case report of a four month old investigation, and the search for the killers of a victim of ligature strangulation. Homicide investigation was based on eyewitness account and autopsy report. The search ultimately ended with the realization that the hunt was unnecessary. The case was that of suicidal hanging. This report unveils the hollowness of thinking that the family members of the deceased don't lie or influence the autopsy opinion.

Keywords: Presumption in Hanging. Homicidal Hanging. Misleading Version of Suicidal Hanging. Autopsy Criticism. Errors in Autopsy

The Death of a person with a ligature mark around his neck is usually controversial. The question raised is whether the death is due to hanging, or the result of ligature strangulation. We bring to you a case report regarding the death of a young man. The case was controversial because there was an eyewitness account that someone had killed the victim. Also, there was no indication that the deceased had been hanged, or that the body had been moved. The case was presented as that of a ligature strangulation. It was difficult to convince the investigators that the case was not a homicide.

A young man died in his own house in a small village. According to the Police report the wife of the deceased and his brothers had reportedly seen three men kill the victim in the courtyard of the house, and then flee by jumping across a wall into the neighbors house. One of the three men lived in the adjacent house, which was separated from the deceased's residence by the common wall in

the courtyard. The relatives story was supported by an autopsy opinion of ligature strangulation. The initial investigation ended with the arrest of the neighbor and a search for the other two men.

The death began to raise controversy in the village when the Police began to put pressure on the villagers to hand over the remaining two men. The village held many meetings. Popular opinion created the need to re-investigate the case, as many of the villagers were unconvinced by the story that had been told to the Police. The Police investigators received some new clues, and also became convinced that they were on the wrong track. The main problem for the investigators was the clear autopsy opinion of ligature strangulation.



The courtyard

Three months after the actual occurrence the investigators turned to experts in forensic medicine to interpret the meaning of the autopsy photographs. The scene of the occurrence, the family members and neighbors who had visited the scene were also made available to the experts. The team spent a few hours at the scene, examining the circumstances at the time of death, and interviewing those who had been at the scene.

As a result of the examination and interviews the following items were found to be notable:

1. People were asked individually to explain what they had seen. They revealed that it was stormy night, the lights had suddenly gone off, there was occasional lightning, and it was about to rain.

2. Their observations in relation to the location of dead body were different. According to police and some others it was near the gate of the room. The relatives claimed it was in the courtyard. The position of the dead body described by them was not the same. It was found to be at three different places. The issue thus was why should the body be at three different locations in that house?

3. The village headman remembered the brother of the deceased rushed to him in his house to apprise him of the situation. He described and demonstrated the manner of the dead body being thrown across the wall, which he had seen on his visit to the scene. He also apprised of his role in stopping the brothers from doing that.

4. One of the neighbors said he had come with a torch [flashlight] on that night. He even spoke of having seen a blue colored plastic rope hanging from the fan. Where was that rope? No one knew.

5. The ceiling fan where the rope was seen was the only point of suspension in the room. One was convinced that it was possible to hang from it. It was also possible for someone to remove a person

hanging from it. But a rope or some other ligature materials were nowhere to be seen. The relatives were suspected to have deliberately concealed them.

6. The condition of the eyes and the ligature mark in the autopsy photos were suggestive of hanging.

The team talked to doctors who did autopsy. The basis for their opinion of ligature strangulation was the ligature mark. According to them three turns were unlikely in hanging. They had diagnosed fracture & dislocation of C4 vertebrae on external examination of the body.



Conclusion

A criminal act as described by the relatives seemed unlikely. None of them could explain the precise manner of strangulation. None of them spoke of the use of a rope even in their projected story. If one was to believe their version then there should not have been ligature mark at all. The appearance of the face of the deceased is not that expected of the victim of strangulation. The ligature mark was such that it could also have been caused in the process of hanging. A suicide thus seems to be the most probable hypothesis.



Ligature marks are suggestive of hanging

Investigations revealed that the deceased was short-tempered and was a daily drinker. There was a scuffle on that night over the sale of a piece of land in the village. The brothers of the deceased

diffused the situation and knowing he was at fault, and under the influence of alcohol, they pushed him into the room. After bolting the room from the outside they went away. The wife of the deceased returned after some time with food for him and saw him hanging from the ceiling fan. She cried for help. Two brothers of the deceased were the first to arrive. They removed the rope and brought him down from the fan.

After placing him on the ground, one of the brothers went running to the village headman for assistance. When the headman arrived at the house he was surprised to see the brothers of the deceased were engaged in attempting to throw the body across the wall into the neighbor's house. Since the body was heavy and the wall was high they couldn't get it over. They then brought the body to where it was located when the police arrived.

The family members of the deceased wanted to throw his body across the wall on to the other side. They wanted to bring a charge of murder against their neighbors. Had they succeeded in transferring the dead body, they would have succeeded in bringing a homicidal charge on to their neighbors. After all finding the body in the house of the accused is the best proof of a crime. The family members had thus concealed the actual story of suicidal hanging and had used the occasion to project the story of strangulation. Before the police arrived the body had been moved twice.