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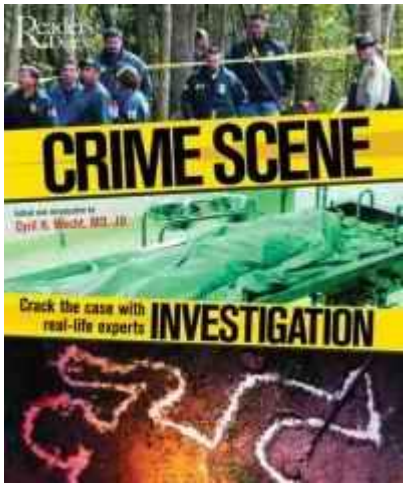
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Importance of the examination of scene of crime: The mysterious scratches on thighs

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Introduction

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Many students ask me the relevance of a forensic pathologist visiting the scene of crime. Recently a case hit the headlines in national press, which highlights greatly the relevance of a proper examination of scene of crime by the forensic pathologist.

The case

A 20 year old student Neha Kakkar was alleged to have committed suicide on 17 June 2006 (Saturday) at about 6.40 pm, by jumping off the sixth floor of the Kirti Shikar building, at the busy Janakpuri District Centre.

Neha was an intelligent girl and had no apparent reason to commit suicide. She was a first-year student of BA psychology at the Jesus and Mary College, New Delhi, was a national-level badminton player and an IAS (Indian Administrative Service, the most prestigious and sought after government post in India) aspirant. She had left her house on Saturday evening to attend coaching classes for the civil services examination at the Rao Study Circle on Barakhamba Road.

To establish the cause of death, a postmortem had to be conducted. It was to be conducted at the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya (DDU) hospital, which caters to deaths occurring in Janakpuri area. However doctors at the DDU hospital observed some scratches on her thighs and private parts. Her clothes were also in disarray which was quite unusual.

Mysterious scratches on the thigh

It appeared that these scratches could not be caused by a fall. The fact that Neha was a young girl, had no apparent reason to commit suicide, her clothes were in disarray and scratches had been found on her thighs and private parts, seemed to confirm that there was some criminal element behind her death. Her family alleged that Neha had been sexually assaulted and then thrown off the building. The doctors at DDU hospital suspected foul play too and requested the police to form a medical board of three doctors, so that truth may come out. The family also wanted the truth to come out.

Subsequently a board of three doctors was formed and the postmortem was conducted at the prestigious Maulana Azad Medical College on 19 June 2006 (Monday). An examination of the genitals did not reveal any evidence of sexual assault, but it was indeed true that there were scratch marks not only on thighs and genitals, but on other parts of the body too. How were they caused, if it was not a case of sexual assault?

Visit to scene of crime solves mystery

It so happens that just below the balcony from where Neha jumped, there were some thorny trees. During the fall, Neha's body was first caught in the trees, which caused multiple scratch marks on her body. This was also responsible for her clothes being in disarray. Only a visit to the scene of crime could solve this mystery. If the forensic pathologists had not visited the scene of crime and had not observed the place of fall for themselves, it would have been very difficult for them to opine upon the cause of those "mysterious" scratches. Although it was not done, I am sure, if an arrangement had been made by the police to reach the upper branches of the tree, fragments of Neha's clothes, her flesh and blood might have been recovered from there, which could have been substantiated by DNA profiling.

After the doctors' report, the police made more enquiries and found Neha was depressed as her lover was apparently not interested in meeting her anymore. She had phoned him several times during the fateful day and had also sent some telltale SMSs - some saying she promised never to SMS him again.

Conclusion

This is an interesting case stressing the need for a visit to the scene of crime. The mystery of the scratches would never have been solved, had a visit to the scene of crime not been arranged. Not only did the family believe - with some justification perhaps - that their daughter had been sexually assaulted, even the experienced doctors at the DDU believed the same. So much so, that they requested for a board of doctors to be formed. The postmortem was subsequently conducted at a more reputed hospital - attached to a teaching institution - by a medical board and three senior doctors from three different hospitals were asked to be members of that board, so that an independent and honest opinion could come out.

References

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