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Original Research Article

Hanging in custodial setup: A 10 year analytical study

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Article Info

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Death

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Abstract

Suicide in custody is a well-established problem. Earlier studies have found that suicides in custody set-up are excess than the general population. Hanging is the most common method of custodial suicide. This is a postmortem examination based retrospective study conducted at Department of Forensic Medicine, Government Medical College and Hospital, Miraj. We examined all available files of inquest papers, autopsy reports, toxicological analysis reports, histopathology reports and case papers into the death of people in custody through 2007 to 2016. A standard proforma was designed to collect the information to ensure consistency for the whole sample. A total 135 autopsies in custodial setup were performed during the 10 year period from January 2007 to December 2016. The mean age was 40.4 years. About 46.66 %deaths were noted in police lockups while 53.33 % deaths were recorded in prison. Suicide in a custodial set up is a tragic event. It creates apprehension and distress, particularly in the family and by and large has repercussions in the society. Identifying the risk prone individual is one of the important steps.

1. Introduction

Suicide in custody is a well-established problem.¹⁻⁴ Suicide behind bar is a preventable but neglected problem in India. Suicide represents a significant correctional health problem and need specific interventions. Earlier studies have found that suicides in custody set-up are excess than the general population.³ Hanging is the most common method of custodial suicide.¹⁻⁵ Though each and every death in custodial set up cannot be avoided; but a significant number of such premature deaths can be prevented with use of preventive measures and interventions.

The aim of present study is to analyse the death due to hanging in custodial setup and to provide data so as to enable to formulate corrective reforms to prevent such untimely death.

2. Material and methods

This is a postmortem examination based retrospective study conducted at Department of Forensic Medicine, Government Medical College and Hospital, Miraj. All available files of inquest

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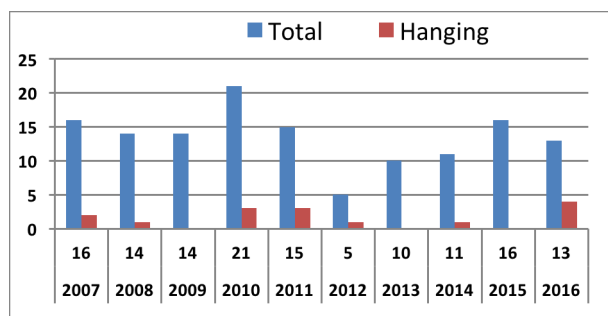
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papers, autopsy reports, toxicological analysis reports, histopathology analysis reports, histopathology reports and case papers into the death of people in custody through 2007 to 2016 were examined. A standard proforma was designed to collect the information to ensure consistency for the whole sample. Only deaths due to suicidal hanging, confirmed after investigation and evaluation of circumstances, were included in the study. Information collected included age, sex, type of custody (prison or police cell), place of death/incident, medical attention received, presence of any associated disease, history of any psychiatric illness, substance abuse and cause of death.

3. Results

A total 135 autopsies in custodial setup were performed during the 10 year period from January 2007 to December 2016 out of which 15 (11.11%) cases were of suicidal hanging. The year-wise distribution of the custodial death and suicide is presented in Fig 1.

Fig 1: Distribution of total number of cases and cases due to suicidal hanging



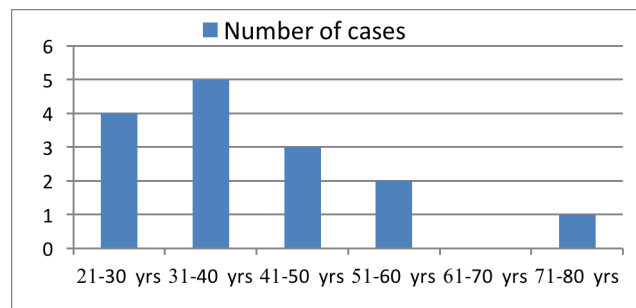
Age and sex

The study consists of 15 incarcerated people consisting of 13 men and 2 women. The mean age was 40.4 years. About 60 % (n = 9) deaths were recorded in the age group of 21 to 40 years (fig 2) while one death was noted at the age of 78 years.

Type of custody

07 deaths (46.66 %) were noted in police lockups while 8 deaths (53.33 %) were recorded in prison (Table 1). Mean age of individuals who died

Fig 2: Distribution of cases according to age groups



in police custody was 36.14 years while mean age of person died in prison was 44.12 years. Among the people who were in police custody, 6 (85.71 %) had committed suicide within 24 hours of the arrest or inquiry. Amongst jail inmates, one person (12.5%) was convicted and 7 (87.5%) were temporary prisoners (under trial/ Magisterial remand). The convicted prison inmate who had committed suicide was suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder (COPD).

Table 1: Custody-wise distribution of cases

Type of custody	Male	Female	No. of cases (%)
Police	06	01	07 (46.66 %)
Prison	07	01	08 (53.33%)

4. Circumstances

Amongst all custodial deaths, 9 (60 %) deaths were noted in early morning hours, 4 (26.66 %) in afternoon hours and 02 (13.33 %) in night hours. 07(46.66 %) deaths occurred in prison cell/ lockup, 6 (40%) deaths occurred in latrine and 02 (13.33%) death occurred at side room in Police Station. The point of suspension in these cases was the grill of cell or window grill of latrine or window grill of side room. Various types of available ligature material like cloth piece, scarf, handkerchief, strip prepared from blanket or chaddar (bed sheet), nada (*waist strip or lace use to fasten underwear*), underwear elastic strip, pant, bandage cloth and sari were used by these people to hang themselves. Amongst these material clad clothes (*nada, underwear strip, and sari*) were used by 8 (53.33%) inmates (fig 1).

5. Discussion

Suicide in a custodial set up is a tragic event. It creates apprehension and distress; particularly in

the family and by and large has repercussions in the society. Sometimes such death tarnishes the image of law enforcement agencies. Nowadays an enquiry is conducted by the National Human Right Commission in custodial death. Similarly such deaths are investigated by different agencies like Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Judicial Magistrate of First Class, Police or State Crime Investigation Department etc. After completion of such inquiry the said documents remain with the investigating agencies or findings are submitted to the Government. Such inquiry findings should be utilized for the purpose of reformation or for initiation of preventive measures to prevent such unfortunate death.

Studies conducted in several countries have found an increase in suicide rates in custody over the last five decades.³ These inmates utilize available means to commit suicide. Hanging is the major cause of committing suicide in custodial set-up. These inmates use available means like satranji (dari), chadar, underwear, lungi, hospital bandage or belt as a ligature material to hang themselves.^{1,2} Apart from this, in the present study we had noted use of clad clothes (n = 8 [53.33 %]) as a ligature material to hang themselves. The clad clothes were sari (n = 2), nada (*waist band of under wear*) (n = 3), strip of underwear (n = 2) and pant (n = 1). Use of such clad cloth is a new threat and means to hang oneself. The Police or Prison authorities should be aware about use of such unusual ligature material.

While analysing the time of committing suicide, it was observed that most of the suicides (n = 9 [60 %]) occurred in early morning hours. A feeling of isolation, despair and helplessness might be experienced by the inmate.⁵ This may be a reason to take such an extreme step by inmates. Identifying such inmates and recognizing the psychological aspect of a person, especially if arrested for first time is crucial step in preventing such death. Moreover, close monitoring at least for initial 24 hour period may be useful step. As observed in previous studies,

suicidal hanging is facilitated by the bar construction of cells and windows. These bars are utilized by the inmates as a suspension point. In the present study, bar of window or cell were utilized by the inmates to hang them. Therefore, elimination of bar type of construction and redesigning of cell would reduce the available means for committing suicide.⁵

Preventing suicide in setup needs cooperation and coordination amongst the Police force or Prison authorities. Identifying the risk prone individual is one of the important steps. Improvements in the reception and first night policy should be clearly identified and followed carefully. Monitoring and assessment of the prone individual and use of close circuit surveillance system should be considered as a priority and should be made available. Similarly improvements in cell design, removal of ligature points and avoidance of single cell accommodation should be considered. As identified in present study use of self-apparel as a ligature material to commit suicide cannot be ruled out so caution should be exercised while putting the individual in cell.

5. Conclusion

The present study had identified some traits or risk factors for suicidal hanging in custodial setup. However, the list is not exhaustive but with ongoing research and availability of new knowledge, another set of risk factors can be identified. It is true that each and every death in custody cannot be prevented but by and large such untimely death can be reduced with considerable numbers if appropriate preventive steps are implemented.

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