Case Report
SUDDEN DEATH OR SUICIDAL DROWNING: A CASE REPORT
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Abstract:
A 35 year male was found dead in police custody with his head submerged, in small bucket. On autopsy showed few injuries, there were atherosclerotic changes in ascending aorta and at coronary, congestion of the organs and scanty lathery froth in bronchi. Being unusual presentation this case is presented.

Keywords: Sudden Death, Drowning, Suicide, Custody Death.

Case Report:
A 35 years old man was sent to police custody for allegedly killing his wife and daughter by burns. The police sentry noticed him lying in the lavatory attached to the custody room in dorsal position with his head submerged in a small bucket of water used for cleaning purpose. He was immediately taken to the hospital where the Doctor declared him dead. At autopsy, on external examination he was moderately built, average nourished adult, no froth at mouth or nostrils. Postmortem lividity was present on posterior aspect and was not fixed. There were three reddish, brownish contusions on back and buttocks and one reddish contusion on right upper thigh and a reddish abrasion just below right knee anterior. Internally the brain was congested and edematous, weighing 1300 gms with few petechial haemorrhages. The lungs were congested, edematous and weighed 650 gms. The bronchi showed scanty, fine, lathery froth. The heart was normal externally and weighed 250 gms. Internally showed atherosclerotic patches at ascending aorta and coronary ostia. The right coronary was narrowed. Abdominal organs were congested, liver was weighing 1500 gms, spleen 300 gms and kidneys 150 gms each. Viscera were preserved for chemical analysis. Organ pieces were preserved for histopathological examination. The chemical analysis did not reveal any poison. However, the histopathological examination revealed atherosclerosis of aorta and left coronary, splenic haemorrhages, interstitial pneumonitis with mild pulmonary haemorrhages and glomerular and tubular haemorrhages in kidneys.

Discussion:
Majority of the deaths due to submersion are either by accident or by suicide. Polson has described a case of a farmer, aged-61 years was in the habit of putting his head into a bucket of cold water during hot weather. He was found dead, half kneeling, half crouching in his wash house. He had signs of death by drowning and also of severe coronary artery disease. It appeared that he had had a heart attack and death was accelerated by drowning.

Polson has described a case of a woman aged 50 years, intending suicide, drowned herself by thrusting her face into a bowl of water, the depth of which was only 6 inches. She was found dead in her bed with the bowl tightly held in her hands.

Spitz has described a case of a 56 year old worker standing on a concrete platform painting a bridge support suddenly fell into the shallow water and was taken immediately to hospital where he died after fifteen minutes. At autopsy, no injuries were noted. The lungs were heavy, and on incision large amounts of fluid and foam exuded from cut surfaces. The appearance of the lungs suggested that the death was due to drowning. The coronary arteries showed far advanced atherosclerosis. At a later hearing before workman’s compensation commission a fellow worker was painting next to the deceased testified that his friend had complained of severe chest pain few minutes prior to his fall. He was picked up within a few
seconds and his head and shoulders had not been submerged. On the basis of this testimony it was decided that the death was due to acute heart attack. In this case the typical findings suggestive of drowning or myocardial insufficiency or fatal injuries were absent. There was no evidence of any intoxication. Ordinarily the whole body submersion of the victim is required, but submersion of the nose and the mouth alone for a sufficient period can cause death from drowning. The injuries found on the body were not sufficient to cause death so also, the contusions on back and both buttocks were reddish brownish in colour indicating their age. On external and internal examination there was no evidence of injury to the scalp or brain. Homicidal drowning caused by forceful submersion of head in water seems impossible. The haemorrhages found on microscopic examination might be due to trauma exhibited on the back. From the postmortem examination, chemical analysis and histopathological reports the deceased appears to be succumbed to pre-existing coronary disease (atherosclerosis) accelerated by process of drowning.

References: