

# CASE REPORT

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## HOMICIDE BY A ROAD TRAFFIC ACCIDENT: A CASE REPORT

Yandra Pydiraju<sup>1</sup>, B. R. Sreedevi<sup>2</sup>, Narendra Bendi<sup>3</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Deaths from road traffic accidents need a meticulous autopsy examination and a proper interpretation of injuries, as they can be a source of potential homicide among them. We report a case of homicide which was brought as a death in a 'hit and run' case to our mortuary. After our post mortem examination and issuing of our report, the investigative authorities were able to nab the actual culprit involved in the murder.

**KEYWORDS:** Road traffic accident, homicide, throttling, meticulous autopsy.

**INTRODUCTION:** As a Forensic Autopsy Surgeon, complete and detailed post mortem examination is necessary to know the exact cause of death. In deciding the manner of death as natural or unnatural (accidental, homicidal, suicidal); scientific interpretation of evidence at crime scene, trace evidences on the dead body, circumstantial evidence, chemical analysis, histopathological examination is necessary and important along with postmortem findings. In some cases, natural disease pathology may be aggravated or precipitated by unnatural causes and the unnatural cause combined with natural cause may result in death. In those conditions the forensic expert should substantiate which one is important in causing the death of the deceased - natural or unnatural or unnatural aggravated the natural pathology or combined or undetermined.

### CASE REPORT:

**HISTORY:** The deceased was a female aged about 40 years and was brought to the mortuary for post mortem examination under Section 304 (A) IPC (alleged to have died in a Road Traffic Accident) with injuries on left side of the face and head.

**POST MORTEM FINDINGS:** Post mortem examination on the same day had shown bruising of left temporal and adjoining fronto-parietal scalp, abrasion over left side of face, laceration on left half of upper lip, diffuse traumatic subdural hemorrhage present all over the brain as a thin layer which is more on left side, and hemorrhagic contused necrosed softened area in the base of left frontal lobe of the brain.

Two linear abrasions each of 1.5x0.2 cm were present on front outer half of upper one third on right neck, three centimeters below the right lower jaw. Bruising of 3x2 cms size was present in the neck tissues underlying the linear abrasions. Fracture of hyoid bone with complete displacement of fractured fragment inwards with bruising and infiltration of blood present at and surrounding the fracture site. Internally, all organs were congested and mildly edematous. The cause of death was given as "respiratory and circulatory failure due to injury to brain due to head injury associated with throttling".

# CASE REPORT

**Investigative findings based on autopsy report:** The deceased female was married ten years back and was involved in an extramarital affair with another man. The husband planned to kill her in a road traffic accident creating it as a 'hit and run' scene. As planned he dashed her from back with a motorcycle while she was returning with another lady (who was a close relative of the husband) after watching a movie. After hitting her with the motorcycle, he came back to the crime scene after fifteen minutes to confirm her death. He saw her in an unconscious state but still was breathing. Then, he used his both hands on the front of the neck and throttled her to death, and fled the crime scene.



**Fig. 1: Injuries due to hit by the vehicle**



**Fig. 2: Finger nail abrasions due to Throttling**



**Fig. 3: Fracture of Hyoid bone with perivascular infiltration under finger nail abrasions**

**DISCUSSION:** In this case, the preliminary investigation by police as narrated before postmortem examination was death due to 'hit and run.' The postmortem findings included injuries on left side of face, diffuse sub arachnoid hemorrhage, contusion of frontal pole of brain, fingernail abrasions on the neck and a hyoid bone fracture with periosteal infiltration around fracture site. As a general rule during post mortem examination, if a hyoid bone is found fractured the death will be a homicide from strangulation until proven otherwise.<sup>1</sup> At the outset

# CASE REPORT

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what appeared to be a death involved in a road accident turned out to be a perfectly planned murder. To decide the manner of death as homicide (culpable homicide amounting to murder or not amounting to murder); intention to kill, plan to kill and an attempt to kill are necessary.<sup>2</sup>

In manual strangulation or throttling, a form of violent asphyxiation, the neck is compressed with fingers.<sup>3</sup> The upper part of the neck is mostly affected and the pressure is exerted there against the mandible. The neck may be compressed from the front, back or from any side and one or both hands may be used. Throttling for all practical purposes is always homicidal, accidental throttling is rare and suicidal throttling is not possible. In the present case too, the accused had tried to create a scene of road traffic accident to conceal the crime committed as manual strangulation, but the postmortem findings amply clarify the actual method of killing. A rudimentary knowledge of neck anatomy is critical in order to understand adequately the features of strangle victim. The occurrence and degree of mechanical injuries are generally reported to be less marked in suicide, than in homicide<sup>4</sup>. The fingernail abrasions were only present as external injuries on the neck due to throttling without any finger tip bruising as the pressure was applied on the victim who was unconscious and nearing death.

In deciding the death due to hit by vehicle; examination of the accident scene, examination of the involved vehicles, complete autopsy of all dead victims and study of pattern of injuries, physical examination of both dead and surviving drivers and psychiatric examination of surviving drivers and personal and social histories of surviving persons is important.<sup>5</sup> It is not often practical for forensic pathologists to go the scene of a motor vehicle fatality. However, when possible, viewing the scene first hand can provide vital clues about the dynamics of the accident and the source of the injuries. If the forensic pathologist cannot personally go to the scene, thorough documentation by a well-trained representative can be a close substitute.<sup>6</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Motor vehicle fatalities are generally, by convention, certified as accident, despite the definition of homicide as "death at the hand of another." Most automobile accidents are accidental; few are suicidal, and still fewer are homicidal. Pattern of injuries and circumstances of death often indicate the manner. When a premeditated murder of a pedestrian occurs due to an automobile, the driver hopes to avoid the blame altogether if he is able to successfully drive away, or at least get away with a lesser charge under section 304 (A) IPC. So against this background, this case report emphasizes the importance of meticulous post mortem examination and documentation of injuries in administration of justice in Road Traffic Accident Deaths.

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# CASE REPORT

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## **AUTHORS:**

1. Yandra Pydiraju
2. B. R. Sreedevi
3. Narendra Bendi

## **PARTICULARS OF CONTRIBUTORS:**

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology, Andhra Medical College.
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Physiology, Andhra Medical College.
3. Senior Resident, Department of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology, Andhra Medical College.

## **NAME ADDRESS EMAIL ID OF THE CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:**

Dr. Yandra Pydiraju,  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of Forensic Medicine &  
Toxicology, Andhra Medical College,  
Visakhapatnam-530002.  
E-mail: [yandra.pydiraju@gmail.com](mailto:yandra.pydiraju@gmail.com)

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