

Knowledge & Perception of General Population on Forensic Autopsy in Ahmedabad City

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Abstract

The Autopsy is beneficial in determining, the cause of death, time since death, validity of therapeutic modalities, potential medico-legal issues surrounding death and providing data on disease & injury. This cross-sectional study was carried out on a general population of Ahmedabad City with the help of questionnaires specially prepared in vernacular language i.e. Gujarati. We observed that overall awareness is quite good regarding the aims and objectives of postmortem examination in the general population. But general populations have poor knowledge about legal procedure regarding post mortem examination. Among the respondents who rejected autopsy, most of them feared of disfigurement of the body of their near ones, followed by delays in funeral, the involvement of police/court & fear of removal of the organs. Refusal on the religious ground was the least common reason cited by the participants. People have to be made aware of the process and importance of a medico-legal autopsy by various programs & seminars so that the relatives won't resist autopsy of their near ones.

Keywords: Knowledge; Perception; Medico-legal Autopsy; General Population

Introduction

The Autopsy is beneficial in determining, the cause of death, time since death, validity of therapeutic modalities, potential medico-legal issues surrounding death and providing data on disease & injury¹. Autopsy is still under the umbrella of misconceptions, myths and emotions by lay people as well as by the physicians². Though medico-legal autopsy is mandatory in most of the cases of unnatural death, the relatives of the deceased may have a negative attitude towards autopsy³.

In medico-legal autopsy the consent of the relatives is immaterial according to Indian law. In such a scenario, the response of relatives can vary greatly, ranging from objection to approval. The investigation into the experiences of the next of kin will help both family and forensic experts to deal with the borderline situations that are so often encountered⁵.

A recently expressed opinion of Behra C et al states that autopsy is not something that should be performed as a favor to the family, but is something to which the family has a right, of which they should be informed⁶. Researchers have shown that people have developed positive attitudes towards autopsy and even understood the technical aspects of the autopsy^{6, 7}. Although social aspects affect the public view more than religious facts, Islam also now accepts autopsies when useful⁸.

It is important to explore the knowledge and perception of public towards medico-legal autopsy as it helps the police and doctors to understand the required fields where they have to inform the near relatives of the deceased about the legal requirements and procedure of an autopsy⁹. The present study was carried out to know perspective, attitude and knowledge on medico-legal autopsy among the general population.

Material and Method

This cross-sectional study was carried out on the general population of Ahmedabad City from January to June 2019. A total of 500 peoples participated in the study. The study was done with the help of questionnaires specially prepared in vernacular language i.e. Gujarati

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for the study. Questionnaires were given to interested participants after obtaining informed written consent & responses were made anonymously. The questionnaires consisted of perspective and knowledge of the medico-legal autopsy. After obtaining the response, some facts of postmortem examination regarding given questionnaires were acquainted and tried to clear their doubt if any.

Results

Questionnaires were distributed among a small group of the general population and obtained a response. Total of 500 respondents were successfully participated & included in the study. The data regarding socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, response to a questionnaire about knowledge and perception particularly factors for rejection for medico-legal autopsy obtained, was tabulated and analyzed. The data obtained are shown in Tables 1 & 2.

Table 1: Knowledge of medico-legal autopsy among the participants

Sr No	Questionnaire/Statements	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know(%)
1	Postmortem Examination is medical examination to find out the cause of death, time & manner of death	476 (95.2)	0 (0)	24 (4.8)
2	The family members must give consent before performing a postmortem examination	381 (76.2)	102 (20.4)	17 (3.4)
3	Postmortem Examination is not needed if the nearest relatives of the deceased do not request for it.	317 (63.4)	125 (25)	58 (11.6)
4	The whole body has to be dissected during Postmortem Examination	450 (90)	44 (8.8)	6 (1.2)
5	Blood sample is collected during postmortem examination	253 (50.6)	204 (40.8)	43 (8.6)
6	Internal organs collected for further investigation during postmortem examination	293 (58.6)	191 (38.2)	16 (3.2)
7	The internal organs are stolen for selling purpose during postmortem examination	103 (20.6)	393 (78.6)	4 (0.8)
	If Yes (n=103)			
	For the purpose of organ transplantation	103 (100)	0	0
	For the purpose of the black magic procedure	56 (54.37)	0	47 (45.63)
8	Dissected Body is stitched & reconstructed to make it presentable after completion of postmortem examination	488 (97.6)	11 (2.2)	1 (0.2)
9	The body is disfigured after Postmortem Examination	442 (88.4)	53 (10.6)	5 (1)
10	After postmortem examination body emits foul smell	306 (61.2)	191 (38.2)	3 (0.6)
	Postmortem examination is indicated in			
	a) Accidental Death	495 (99)	4 (0.8)	1 (0.2)
	b) Suicidal Death	478 (95.6)	21 (4.2)	1 (0.2)
	c) Homicidal Death	498 (99.6)	2 (0.4)	0 (0)
	d) Sudden & Suspicious Death	471 (94.2)	25 (5)	4 (0.8)

Table 2: Perception of medico-legal autopsy among the participants

Sr No	Questionnaire/Statements	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know(%)
1	If your relatives would have to undergo an autopsy, would you object it?	234 (46.8)	260 (52)	6 (1.2)
2	If you object, what are the reasons (n=234)			
	a) Fear of Disfigured	210 (86.74)	22 (9.40)	2 (0.85)
	b) Fear of removal of organs	103 (44.02)	127 (54.27)	4 (1.71)
	c) Religious Reason	26 (11.11)	203 (86.75)	5 (2.14)
	d) Involvement of police/court	146 (62.39)	85 (36.32)	3 (1.28)
	e) Delay in funeral	198 (84.62)	32 (13.68)	4 (1.71)

Discussion

We observed that almost all people (more than 90%) were agreed upon that the postmortem examination is required to find out cause of death, time & manner of death. The whole body has to be dissected during postmortem examination which is then stitched & reconstructed to make it presentable before handing over to police/relatives. Our findings are consistent with Subedi N et al⁹. We also observed that 50.6% population were agreed upon that, Blood samples collected during postmortem examination & 58.6% population were agreed upon that internal organ collected for further investigation during postmortem examination. Overall awareness is quite good regarding the aims and objectives of postmortem examination in the general population.

We observed that 76.2% people were agreed upon that, the family members must give consent before performing postmortem examination and 63.4% were agreed upon that postmortem examination is not needed if the nearest relatives of the deceased do not request for it. General populations have poor knowledge about legal procedure regarding post mortem examination. People think that if the relatives request the concerned authority, then only autopsy is initiated. Medico-legal

autopsy is performed to determine the cause, manner and time since death for legal purposes and is initiated by the state. So, it is the responsibility of the relatives or anyone who suspects unnatural death of a person to inform the police. Then, police conduct necessary inquest and can forward the body to perform medico-legal autopsy¹⁰. It is no need to take consent from the relatives before the autopsy.

We observed that 20.6% of people agreed upon that, internal organ were stolen for selling purpose during postmortem examination. The percentage is relatively high and raised our eyebrows. There are myths present that internal organs were stolen for selling purpose for organ transplantation & some facts already published in the news that organs were stolen for the black magic procedure by postmortem workers in absence of doctors which was published in "The Times of India" on 5th July 2015 at Meeruth(UP).

Majority people (88.4%) were agreed upon that body is disfigured after postmortem examination, while 61.2% of people were agreed upon that, after postmortem examination body emits a foul smell. Most of the respondents were aware that medico-legal autopsy is indicated in unnatural deaths like accidental, suicidal,

homicidal, and sudden suspicious deaths.

When we had asked them whether they would reject the autopsy of their relatives, 52% of people responded that they would not. It is an important issue that many people now accept autopsies if indicated. Behera et al⁶. But still large population have objection regarding the autopsy of their relatives.

Among the respondents who rejected autopsy, most of them feared of disfigurement of the body of their near ones. Similar findings were presented in studies of Behra et al⁶ and Parmar P et al¹¹. One of the objectives of a medico-legal autopsy is to cosmetically reconstruct the body. Not only the post mortem incisions have to be stitched properly, but also other injuries and tissue loss should be reconstructed for better appearance before presenting to the relatives of the deceased. This will help them to better tolerate autopsy of their near ones. Autopsy delays funeral (83.62%), the involvement of police/court (62.39%) and the fear of removal of the organ (44.02%) were other most common causes for autopsy refusal by family members or relatives of the deceased. Refusal on the religious ground was the least common reason cited by the participants.

Conclusion

The present study throws some light on today's perception and knowledge of general population regarding forensic autopsy. Awareness is quite good regarding the aims and objectives of postmortem examination in the general population. But Knowledge about the legal procedure is poor. People have to be made aware of the process and need of a medico-legal autopsy so that the relatives won't resist autopsy of their near ones. Autopsy surgeons should communicate with relatives before starting postmortem examination explaining the whole procedure and need of autopsy and clear their doubt if any. Feedback must be obtained after completion of autopsy and utilize them in future.

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