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Backstabbing—a report of an unusual case

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Abstract A case of a 25-year-old male with a deep knife stab injury in the back is reported. The stab wound penetrated the left thorax and the left lung was injured, a thoracotomy was performed and the patient survived. The injured man could not remember what had happened, his bag was missing and the incident was therefore considered to be due to a robbery. Further results of the police investigations and the forensic pathology inspection revealed an extremely unusual accident constellation.

Keywords Knife stabbing · Unusual site · Accident

Introduction

Knife stabbing is a frequent cause both of homicide and other types of incident (Jones et al. 1994), but accidents where the victim is killed by his own knife are rare (Perdekamp et al. 2000). In a retrospective evaluation of 799 consecutive autopsies of victims of sharp force only 18 cases were classified as accidents but there were no cases of falling or running into one's own knife (Karger et al. 2001). Because of this rare occurrence common characteristics or systematic features of this type of injury do not exist.

The following case was first considered to be a homicide before an accidental origin could be elaborated. Publishing such rare cases may facilitate future investigations of similar cases (Klitschar et al. 2003; Miyaishi et al. 2003; Verhoff and Karger 2003).

Case history

A young man collapsed in a pedestrian precinct and a knife was found sticking in his back which penetrated into the left thorax with a slightly descending angle from the upper right to the left downwards. The entrance wound was 2 cm left of the midline and at the level of the 8th thoracic vertebra. The wound corresponded to a perpetrators position behind the victim with the knife in the raised right hand (Figs. 1, 2 and 3). The left lung was injured, an emergency thoracotomy was performed and the patient survived without any complications. The man was questioned at great length but could not remember anything. His bag was missing and the incident was therefore considered to be the result of a robbery. Police investigations revealed that the victim had been drinking together with his colleagues and a taxi driver stated that he had transported the drunken man to the edge of the pedestrian precinct. After leaving the taxi he staggered towards the place where he later collapsed. Later on the sport bag of the injured was discovered in the pedestrian zone. The bag was damaged along its length and showed traces of blood in the surrounding areas (Fig. 4). It contained three unprotected butcher's knives (Fig. 5) and a grinding machine (Fig. 6). The occurrence could be reconstructed as follows: the injured man (a butcher by profession) reported that it had been his habit to sling his bag over his shoulder. Presumably he did so after he had left the taxi with the consequence that the grinding machine weighing 2.5 kg was hurled with a high energy against the knives and one of them penetrated the cloth bag and then penetrated the back of his thorax. He was wearing only a T-shirt and because of his drunken state he did not realise what had happened.

Discussion

Accidental knife stabbing in the back is a very unusual event. In our case the final question whether the incident was accidental or homicidal could be decided only after a

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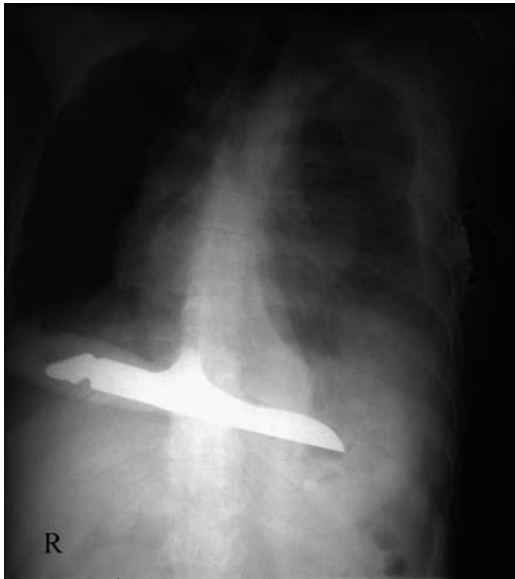


Fig. 1 X-ray examination of the victim after clinical admission in the anterior-posterior position

Fig. 2 X-ray examination of the victim after clinical admission in a lateral position



Fig. 3 Medico-legal investigations of the victim 1 day after the incident



Fig. 4 The sport case of the injured with defects caused by sharp forces



Fig. 5 The content of the sport case: butcher knives



Fig. 6 The content of the sport case: a grinding machine

careful consideration of all of the facts. Characteristic features of accidental wound morphology in relation to homicidal could not be established.

In our case the degree of sharpness of the tip of the knife and the impact velocity resulted in the profound effect. Furthermore, the region of the body where the infliction takes place is of great importance. Knight (1975) mentioned that the intercostals spaces can be penetrated much easier than the upper abdomen because the tissues are stretched tightly across the ribs. This case represents a real rarity assisted by extraordinary circumstances.

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