

Comments on unassisted smothering in a pillow

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Abstract A case of homicidal smothering with a pillow is reported. The vital aspiration of fibres was proven by microscopic examination of a tracheobronchial lavage.

Keywords Smothering · Pillow · Tracheobronchial lavage · Fibres

Schmelting et al. [4] reported on an interesting case of asphyxia of a psychiatric patient in a pillow. Their diagnosis was based on the (negative) autopsy findings (no concurrent cause of death) and histological examination (hemorrhagic dysoric syndrome with acute pulmonary emphysema). Toxicological analysis revealed a typical treatment with neuroleptics. It is well known that the diagnosis of death by smothering is very difficult [1, 2]. In such cases of smothering in a pillow, it is important to search also for evidence of the aspiration of fabric fibres. The preservation of traces around the mouth and nose with scotch tapes can demonstrate the close contact of, e.g. a

pillow with the face. But only the evidence of fibres in the trachea can prove the vital obstruction of the airways by textile material and aspiration of fibres.

The importance of fibre evidence is stressed by a recent murder case which was examined in the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Bonn. A 72-year-old slim woman was found dead in her living room. Autopsy revealed a compression of the thorax with contusion of the heart, fracture of the ribs 2 to 6 right and 5 and 6 left. Petechial haemorrhages were found in the eyelids, in the conjunctivae, the face and the neck, in addition a bilateral hyposphagma. The cervical spine was injured between the fifth and the sixth vertebra. On the arms, there were multiple haematomas. In the face, desiccated areas were situated on the right front, on the left eyebrow, in the left nasolabial ply and the left cheek. On the lips, three superficial tears up to 5 mm length were observed (Fig. 1). These findings raised the suspicion that a green pillow which was found at the scene had been pressed on the face. Therefore, a tracheobronchial lavage with distilled water was performed during autopsy. The about 50-ml liquid were centrifuged; the sediment was dashed out on slides and dried. Using a dissecting microscope at a magnification of $\times 45$, several blue, green and cyan fibres were detected (Fig. 2). The fibres were obviously aspirated during smothering.

Later, the murderer confessed that he had practised burking while smothering the woman with the green pillow. His motive was the theft of cash money and the bank card.

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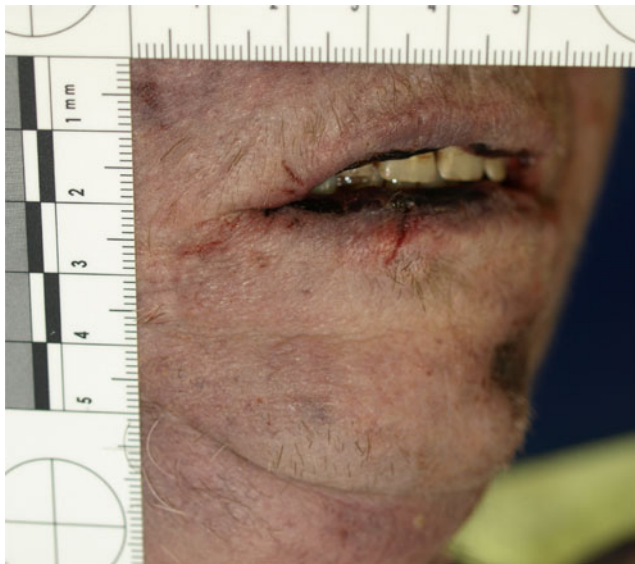


Fig. 1 Lips with superficial tears

Conclusion

While fibres in adhesive tapes around nose and mouth prove smothering, the finding of fibres in the trachea corresponds to a vital reaction and is evidence that tight contact with a fabric occurred during life [3]. Therefore, a tracheobronchial lavage should be carried out in such cases.

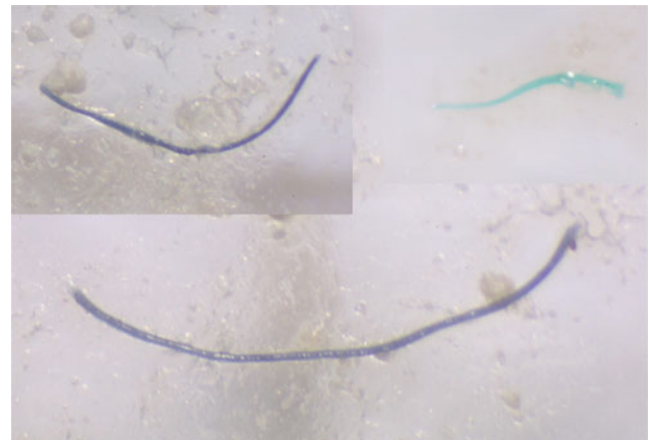


Fig. 2 Different fibres in the sediment of the tracheobronchial lavage (magnification $\times 45$)

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