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REVIEW ARTICLE

Knowledge, attitude and perception of family members on medico-legal autopsy: a critical review

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ABSTRACT

In case of an unnatural, sudden, and suspicious death, medico-legal autopsies play a vital role in identifying the cause of death. Though consent is not required for a medico-legal autopsy (MLA), a pathological autopsy needs permission from the legal custodians in India. The knowledge, attitude, and perceptions (KAP) of the deceased's family members towards MLA may help the forensic fraternity and administrations handle situations demanding an autopsy and assess the reasons for the refusal of an MLA by the family members of the deceased. Studies have been conducted worldwide to understand family members' KAP about the procedures of it. The findings of which have been along the same lines. The general KAP about autopsy vary significantly in various countries and communities. The moral, ethical and legal issues also vary. Even today, these attitudes are encountered, and further consideration would carry us too far afield. Even many of us argue today that more autopsies are performed than necessary. Still, everyone should remember that it can detect the underlying cause, which was not suspected during the person's life. The growing awareness of genetic factors' influence on disease is also demonstrated at autopsy. It should be remembered that autopsies can provide peace of mind for the bereaved family on many occasions. Therefore, an autopsy should be encouraged regardless of caste, community, and religion upon unnatural, obscure, suspicious deaths. □

Keywords: Religious prohibition; community support; pathological autopsy. □

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INTRODUCTION

Autopsy in Greek means "to see with one's own eyes". A scientific study of a dead body is categorized as pathological or medico-legal autopsies.¹ It aims to establish the identity of a body when not known; to ascertain the time since death and the cause of death; and whether the death was natural or unnatural and, if unnatural, whether it was homicidal, suicidal, or accidental. It can also establish the live birth and viability,^{2,3} besides advancing knowledge and contributing to the science of disease.⁴ It is crucial in assessing injury-related deaths and obtaining reliable

mortality data.⁵ The unnatural death rate in India is 39.2 per 1000 live births annually.⁶ This means that unnatural deaths account for 10.3% of total deaths,⁷ of which require an MLA.

Though MLA is accepted in most advanced countries, it continues to be under the umbrella of misconceptions, myths and emotions by the general people and physicians.⁸ The adverse connotations associated with an MLA may sometimes encourage a general practitioner to issue a death certificate in cases where there is only circumstantial evidence of the underlying cause.⁹

The law in India does not require the consent of the family member to carry out an MLA though it requires for pathological autopsy. However, investigations into the KAP of the first grief during an autopsy will help family and forensic experts deal with the borderline situations that are often encountered.⁸ Families approving autopsies identify comfort in knowing the exact cause of death,⁹ yet 80% of the relatives refused to consent to autopsy due to concern regarding mutilation of the body.¹⁰ Similar trends were observed in other studies conducted in Nigeria,¹¹ China¹² and Sweden.^{8,11,10} Teaching and health research institutions rely on people's willingness to donate their bodies or organs after death. The procedures involving corpses entail complex and growing problems to some extent¹² due to the lack of proper KAP.

Therefore, it becomes imperative to analyze and assess the KAP of first grief during the autopsy process as it will help us understand their worries about the procedure and highlight the importance of awareness programs to clear misconceptions regarding Medico-Legal autopsies.^{13,10} This review paper explores the different issues about family members' KAP of the MLA.

DISCUSSION

At that time of Tertullian and Augustine, there were strongly religious and social objections to the autopsy. Although there was no formal church prohibition in the early years of Christianity, the general attitude of church leaders was still unfavourable.¹⁴

Influence of education

According to a study done in Nigeria, those between 7 and 12 years of education were more likely (94.6%) to understand autopsies adequately. At the same time, a different study concurred that the general population's lower literacy rate might play a role in the general lack of knowledge about autopsies.

Effect of mutilation

In studies done in India⁸, Nigeria,¹¹ Sweden,¹⁵ China,¹⁶ Zambia,¹⁷ and Nepal,¹⁸ the fear of body deformation was revealed to be the main reason for the refusal of the autopsy.

A study conducted by the author in North-east India found that 92% reportedly accepted an autopsy and 85% for their close relative.¹⁹ This illustrates how autopsy-related concerns cut across racial, cultural, and national boundaries.

However, it is to be noted that an autopsy is a scientific procedure where due consideration is given to preventing the disfigurement of the body.^{11,10} One of the objectives of an MLA is to reconstruct the body cosmetically. Not only do the post-mortem incisions have to be appropriately stitched,

but other injuries and tissue loss should be reconstructed for better appearance before presenting to the relatives of the deceased. Before the autopsy, explaining the process of proper reconstruction of the bodies after the autopsy to the relatives can help alleviate their concerns and make it easier for them to accept the autopsy of their loved ones.¹⁸

Others concerns

Among the other issues linked with the refusal of the autopsy are delays in funerals and the involvement of police and court.⁸ The least stated reasons are concerns regarding removing body organs and lack of feedback on autopsy results.^{8,11}

While some studies found that lack of adequate information on the reason for autopsy by police and doctor were also among the least stated concerns,¹¹ others found that it was a common concern cited by relatives of the deceased.^{8,18}

Religious and cultural obligations

All cultures and religions have different funeral customs, beliefs, and practises, which have led to disagreements over anatomic dissections and post-mortem investigations. In the past, many have even believed that such viewpoints prevent advancements in science and medicine.²⁰ People who grow up in more westernized or multicultural contexts tend to have looser ties to customs, religion, and beliefs and are more accepting of the autopsy. The customs, beliefs, and practices surrounding death are more unified among non-westernized cultural groups, and autopsies are often disapproved for religious reasons in these regions.²¹

Islam believes the deceased body is God's possession and should be returned to Him in the best condition. Based on this conviction, Islamic tradition does not encourage post-mortem analysis due to inflexible death rituals and customs such as the burial of a corpse within 24 hours, and not being preserved, etc.²²⁻²⁴ A former study²⁵ showed that Muslims in Libya preferred a more rapid burial, particularly for children; 77% of Muslims in Libya, 16% of Muslims in the UK preferred to bury a child within 12 hours of death, whereas only 7% of non-Muslims in the UK preferred to do so. Moreover, 93% and 98% of Muslims residing in Libya and the UK felt that autopsy has a negative emotional effect on the family compared to only 64% of the non-Muslims.

Hinduism believes the soul departs from the body after death while conscious. Therefore, according to Hinduism, an autopsy might disrupt the soul.^{26,10} A study conducted in rural Haryana, where 80.6% of the population were Hindus, found that even though religious obligations weren't cited as a common reason for an autopsy refusal, 77.3% believed that autopsy would disturb the peace of the deceased. In a

similar study conducted on Malaysian Hindus,²⁷ religious objections were found to be one of the factors influencing autopsy refusal by Hindus. However, the general attitude of the Malaysian Hindus was found to be positive towards autopsy.

Although there was no formal church prohibition in the early years of Christianity, the general attitude of church leaders was still unfavourable. Today, however, Catholics recognize the usefulness of autopsy and are primarily in favour of its use in medical research, organ transplantation, and diagnostic evaluation. To conduct an autopsy to benefit others is regarded as a charitable deed.²⁸ In the study conducted in Nigeria, it was seen that Christians were more likely to consent to an autopsy on themselves than Muslims.¹¹

It can thus be agreed upon that while most cultures and traditions do not aggressively support autopsy, they do not outrightly condemn them. As a result, attitudes regarding autopsy can differ not only between various religions but also between different religious sects and ideologies within different countries.²⁹

CONCLUSION

Thus, appropriate KAP among the public towards the process of MLA can significantly facilitate their attitude towards it, leading to greater acceptance of the procedure among the global public. The influence of religion on KAP can be changed with appropriate education.

The non or minimally invasive Post-Mortem Computed Tomography imaging method, which is known as Virtual Autopsy, is an advanced 3D visualization technology that has aided and enabled forensic experts to analyze and record their visual findings without physically dissecting the human remains to determine the Cause of Death for investigative and judicial agencies. Applying a non-invasive, less time-consuming technique like Virtopsy can be acceptable for those who feel it hard to consent to the invasive MLA. Virtopsy can both be quality and cosmetically acceptable. The acceptance of this technology is also tremendous among the first grievers because of the non-mutilation of the corpses.

Furthermore, to ease the family of the deceased's concerns about the process, attention should also be placed on providing them with a thorough explanation of the need for an autopsy and how an MLA is conducted. It should be remembered that the autopsy room is not a place where sorrow and the spectre of death come alive; instead, it is where death rejoices to aid the living.

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