

SLAUGHTERSCREAMS FROM A TARRY GRAVE- A CASE REPORT

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ABSTRACT

Most capital crimes are committed in heat of the moment particularly during moments of great emotional stress or under the influence of drugs. And once the heat is shed off, assailants take every opportunity to conceal their wrongs. The modus operandi being the distortion of the identity of deceased either by mutilation or by secret disposal of the corpse. The commonly encountered methods include burying, burning, disposal into water bodies etc. The present case elaborates a bizarre method of disposal where, after a gruesome homicide, the assailants shoved the dead body into a tank of hot tar or bitumen in a nearby construction site. The dead body was found in charred and disfigured state rendering the remains impossible to find out injuries. Further challenging was the sticky bitumen that engulfed the remains.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Bitumen or tar is a thermoplastic material obtained from the destructive distillation of coal and wood by heating at a temperature of 900 to 1200 degrees centigrade.¹ It has waterproofing and adhesive properties and is also used for paving tarmac roads.² When hot tar makes contact with the skin it cools, solidifies and sticks. Because of the very high working temperatures described above, the resulting burns are often severe.³ In its molten form, the tar is capable of gradually burning and seeping into the human remains and bones and spontaneously cause near-total destruction of the body architecture. Excessive heat burns the skin and soft tissues, cooks up the muscles and viscera and char the bones and teeth. Little to no evidence can be found after such burns.

Most capital crimes are committed in heat of the moment.⁴ Once the assailant comes back into his senses, to escape the crime, he tries to hide or dispose the dead body, or identity of deceased, the modus operandi being mutilation or secret disposal of the corpse. In the case discussed here, the dead body was thrown into molten tar so as to destroy any evidence of murder.

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Case history

A middle-aged man goes missing after a quarrel with his neighbors regarding a land dispute. On police interrogation, suspects admitted to have committed manslaughter and disposing the dead body in a bitumen tank at an isolated construction site. The police cut down the tank and recovered the charred corpse smeared with tar. (Photograph 1) The dead body was taken to General Hospital for autopsy but was referred to the apex institute for an expert opinion. The following findings were noted over the body:



Photograph 1

Findings on post-mortem examination

The body was emitting the smell of coal tar. The upper part of body was separated from the lower part at the level of sacroiliac joint except for few charred remnants of tissues bridging both the parts (Photograph 2).



Photograph 2

The scalp was missing except for over the occipital region where scalp hairs were matted in coal tar were present. On opening the skull vault, cranial cavity was partly filled with coal tar. (Photograph 3).



Photograph 3

Brain matter was converted into charred, cooked up, shrunken hard mass. Eyeballs were missing and orbits were filled with coal tar. Nose, ears and lips were missing exposing the underlying teeth and bony structures which were charred and smudged with coal tar. Skin and subcutaneous tissue over the face were charred and beard hairs were smudged with coal tar and identifiable. Facial features were distorted and not identifiable. Skin and soft tissues along with laryngotracheal structures were missing exposing the anterior aspect of the vertebral column which was smudged with coal tar. The skin and soft tissue of all limbs were missing exposing underlying charred bone which was showing post-mortem heat fractures at places. Both feet were detached from legs at the level of the ankle joint and burnt off at places. All the bones were blackened, charred and crumbled on handling. (Photograph 4). Thoracic wall was missing except few remnants of charred soft tissues at places exposing the charred part of the thoracic cage which was showing heat fracture at places and crumbled

pieces of ribs. Both lungs and heart were completely burnt off and converted into a solid mass of ash which is brittle in consistency. (Photograph 5) The liver was completely burnt off and converted into blackish-brown solid mass which is brittle in consistency. Contents of abdominal and pelvic cavities were charred and converted into blackish ashes except for few remnants of cooked up tissue present at places. All the cavities were smeared with coal tar. The pelvic cavity was empty exposing the pelvic bone which was charred and smeared with coal tar. The stump of penis and scrotum were shriveled, charred yet identifiable. The medullary cavities of intact bones were filled with coal tar which is suggestive of imbibition of coal tar.



Photograph 4



Photograph 5

After conducting the autopsy, it was opined that the dead body is of a human male individual. However, a clear opinion as to the cause of death could not be given as no injury was appreciable due to the described condition of the body. The available tissues were preserved for chemical analysis and remnants of clothes were preserved for any trace evidence. The circumstantial evidences were convincing of a homicidal manner.

DISCUSSION

The cause of death is that which produces an effect. It is a combination of circumstances that must precede and that invariably result in an effect.⁵ The method utilized to destroy the dead body is in fact very rare and the authors did not find any such case reported in the region. The most difficult part about this case was to find and interpret the injuries, as there were varied artefacts caused by the thermal destruction of the body. Only a few of the bones have the tensile strength to tolerate the handling and sustain their architecture upon examination.

As noted in the present case, the bony calvaria with all its sinuses and medullary cavities in the long bones were invaded by the molten tar. DNA based identification of the victim is hampered as no purposeful 'reference sample' can be salvaged for DNA profiling.

Grades of bitumen used for the purpose of the pavement of roads, single or multiple solvents like kerosene, diesel, etc. could be mixed with such tar to make different grading of Bitumen emulsions which are used in hot or cold roads. These hydrocarbon solvents can give false-positive results for Chemical Analysis for inflammatory materials. Available viscera salvaged during the autopsy will be contaminated by the solvents and give false-positive results.

CONCLUSION

It is only natural of the assailant to conceal his crimes as a dead body forms the essence of crime or the *corpus delicti*. Without a dead body, there is a possibility that the jury may acquit the criminals. Once the investigating authority finds the body, it is upon the shoulder of autopsy surgeon to find and interpret the injuries. A corpse with such degree of charring, it becomes rather tough to bring out the critical evidence. Nevertheless, demanding a meticulous eye and a skilled hand at the postmortem examination as the tissues crumble upon delicate handling. A good understanding of the effects of heat in the post mortem period will be crucial in separating the artefacts from the factual injuries.

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