

Imitative suicide in childhood: A case report

Çocukluk çağında taklit intihar: Bir olgu sunumu

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Abstract

Suicides are rare among children under 10 years of age. In this report, a case of completed suicide of an 8 year-old girl by hanging, with its interesting history, is presented in order to draw the attention of professionals to childhood suicides. An 8 year-old girl was found to be completely suspended in their barn by her father. Interviewing with family members indicated that, deceased had no problem with her family, school and friends. Death scene investigation did not reveal any findings attributable to accident or homicide. At autopsy, typical findings of hanging were detected. Neither additional traumatic changes nor findings of sexual assault were noticed. No traces of alcohol or common drugs of abuse were detected in toxicological analysis. Death was attributed to mechanical asphyxia due to hanging. Suicidal deaths by hanging among children under 10 years of age can be an imitative action, since children might be provoked into hanging by the demonstrations they witness through media. In this respect, a combination of manufacturing legislation concerning media, increased parental supervision, and educational facilities will help in prevention such deaths.

Key words: childhood suicide, imitative suicide, hanging, media

Özet

On yaş altı çocuklar arasında intihar olguları nadiren görülmektedir. Bu yazıda, ası suretiyle intihar eden 8 yaşında bir kız çocuğu vakası ilginç öyküsü ile sunularak çocukluk çağı intiharlarına dikkatlerin çekilmesi amaçlanmıştır. Sekiz yaşında bir kız çocuğu babası tarafından ahırda asılmış vaziyette bulunmuştur. Aile ile yapılan görüşmede çocuğun ailesi, okulu veya arkadaş çevresi ile ilgili bir problemi olmadığı ifade edilmiştir. Olay yeri incelemesinde kaza veya cinayeti düşündürecek herhangi bir bulgu saptanmamıştır. Otopside, tipik ası bulguları dışında ek travmatik bulgu veya cinsel saldırı bulgusu gözlenmemiştir. Cesetten alınan örneklerin toksikolojik analizlerinde alkol, uyutucu veya uyuşturucu madde saptanmamış olup ölüm sebebinin asiya bağlı mekanik asfiksi olduğu belirlenmiştir. Çocukların medya aracılığı ile tanık oldukları vaka gösterimlerinden etkileneceklerini düşünülmesi göz önüne alındığında, on yaş altı çocuklarda asi ile intiharların taklit intihar olabileceği düşünülmelidir. Bu bağlamda, medya yayınları ile ilgili bir takım yasal düzenlemeler, artmış ebeveyn kontrolü ve ilintili eğitsel aktivitelerin bu tür ölümlerin önlenmesinde yararlı olabileceği düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: çocukluk çağı intiharları, taklit intihar, asi, medya

Introduction

Suicide is the action of killing oneself consciously, considering death an end or a means, most often felt to be escaped from an intolerable situation. Although most of the suicides are associated with a psychopathology it is unusual for a child to accept death as a solution and suicide is a complicated entity for children under the age of 10 to comprehend. For this reason, suicides are rare among children under 10 years of age. Childhood and adolescence suicides comprise approximately 10% of all suicidal deaths in many countries (1, 2). Detailed definition of suicidal acts, particularly hangings, through broadcasting

might attract children into a role play. After execution of Saddam Hussein, several imitative suicidal hanging cases among children and adolescents aged between 9 and 15 years had been seen all over the world (3).

This report presents a case of completed suicide, of an 8 year-old girl, by hanging, as suicides at this age are rare. It was aimed to draw the attention of professionals to imitative childhood suicides.

Case report

An 8 year-old girl was found to be completely suspended in their barn by her father. In death scene

investigation, victim was found to be suspended to the ceiling by a cable. There was a 50 cm height feeding manger next to the suspended body, which can be used as a step to reach the low ceiling to tie the cable. At autopsy; external examination of deceased revealed petechial hemorrhages on both eyes conjunctivae and a single typical external ligature mark surrounding the neck (Picture 1). There were no genital injuries or any other changes secondary to sexual abuse or assault. Visceral congestion and soft-tissue hemorrhage around thyroid cartilage were found in internal examination; however there were no hyoid bone or larynx cartilage fractures. A complete toxicological analysis was also performed, and no trace of illicit drugs or alcohol was found in the blood and organ samples.

Interviewing with family members indicate that, family lives on stockbreeding, and has 4 young and 7 grown children. Deceased had lived with her parents and three siblings. The psychiatric status of the victim, according to the family members, relatives, and teachers was quite normal, without psychiatric diseases or problems that could trigger suicidal ideation. However, the family members stated that the victim was exceedingly affected by the suicide of a hero of TV series. The victim was stated to be habitual for some TV series. Following, watching the part of detailed demonstration of installing hanging mechanism and dramatic scene after death of hero, the victim started to ask questions about hanging and death. Parents expressed as they tried to adequately explain the truth that the hero was not really dead. On following days, victim started to frequently tell her friends about above mentioned scene in detail. But, parents accept this as a temporary situation, which prevent them applying child psychiatry. Lately, they noticed that victim trying set a hanging mechanism and explained the danger of this.

Discussion

Suicide has been reported as the second or fourth most common cause of death in adolescent population (4, 5). A review of the literature revealed that suicide rates are very low in the 10-14 age group, and suicide attempts are rarely encountered in children under 10 years of age. The first suicide attempts are generally committed before 18 years of age; furthermore, the mean age of suicide attempters, at first attempt, was reported to be 13.6 in Glowinski et al. (1, 5-7). Suicide in young has been determined to have highest prevalence in adolescence with a ratio between 58.1 and 70.9%, in the literature (5-9).

Accidental deaths due to hanging can be encountered in children less than 10 years when they

are playing. Yet, suicidal hangings are exceedingly rare in this age group. Presented case was found to be suspended with a complete hanging mechanism in a closed barn and the incident was not witnessed by anyone. Scene investigation did not reveal findings attributable to an accident or homicide. External examination of body was unremarkable apart from a single typical external ligature mark surrounding the neck of the victim. Toxicological analysis was completely negative. Thus, death of case recorded as self inflicted strangulation by hanging.

In Turkey, honor killings and forced suicide are acts of violence against females who are perceived to have harmed family honor by committing adultery, being victim of sexual assault, living a life with boyfriends and lovers (8). In this report, victim was too young and there were no findings attributable a sexual assault or voluntary sexual intercourse, which might eliminate the possibility of honor killing or forced suicide.

The question of "how could an 8 year-old child know to set up a hanging mechanism?" reminds the term "suicide imitation". Detailed definition or depiction of execution or suicidal hangings through broadcasting might attract children into a role play. All over the world, several imitative suicides by hanging among children and adolescents aged between 9 and 15 years, after execution of Saddam Hussein, alarmed researchers and healthcare professionals about the contagious influence of media reporting (3). Likely, the presented victim was exceedingly affected by the suicide of a hero of TV series.

Healthcare professionals and policy makers should encourage and set educational facilities for parents, caregivers and teachers about vulnerability of children, and adolescents and possible impacts of media release. Furthermore, promoting ethical or legal responsibilities of media may be highly effective in prevention of such suicide imitations.

Note: This case was presented in "5th Congress of The Balkan Academy of Forensic Sciences. Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia. 3-7 June 2007" as a poster presentation.



Picture 1: Typical external ligature mark on the neck

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