Unusual suicide by electric saw: A case report

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Abstract Suicide by power saws (bland, chain, circular or router saw) are an extreme exception. A few case reports are published in forensic literature regarding it. We report the case of a 30-year-old carpenter found dead lying on the floor next to a router saw in his carpenter workshop, with two gaping and deep wounds in his head. We summarize the findings of the death scene examination, the forensic autopsy, and the world literature concerning suicide committed with power saws.

1. Introduction

In our forensic activity, we see different methods of suicide. In Tunisia the most common one is hanging. Suicides or suicide attempts with electric saws are rather rare events. The use of an electrical saw/chain saw is mainly associated with accidents. In forensic literature, few cases of suicide with the use of an electrical saw have been reported. In addition to these cases, we report the case of a suicide committed by a young carpenter with a router saw in his carpenter workshop. We describe the circumstances of the suicide, the scene and the forensic autopsy findings. We also present a review concerning suicide by an electric saw.

2. Case report

The decedent was a 30-year old single carpenter. He started working with his brother from a young age without any problems. One day, he was found dead in his carpenter workshop after being long awaited by his family at night. No medical or psychiatric history was found, except mood and behaviour changes a few days before the death, without any previous suicide attempts.

At the scene examination, the workshop doors were closed. The victim was found lying down beside a router saw. The safety system was removed (Photo 1). Two parallel wounds were observed at his scalp with a pool of blood below his head. No disorder in the workshop was noticed. There were splashes of blood on the wall and the wooden boards, as well as bloodstains on the router saw.

Some blood stains reproduced the shape of the fingers’ and puddles of blood were on the ground (Photo 1).

At the external examination, we found two parallel, gaping and deep cranio-cerebral wounds with loss of bone substance. The upper one, measured 12 cm, extended from right parietal area to the left one. The next wound measured 11 cm in the occipital area (Photo. 2). No other traumatic injuries were observed except a few abrasions on the elbows. Hands, face and neck were covered with dried blood.

At the forensic autopsy, there was obvious and violent traumatic brain injury. Indeed, there was an extensive (ecchymosis) facing the two wounds already described in the external review. The dissection of the scalp exposed two parallel
wounds with loss of bone substance with regular edges in the parietal and occipital areas (Photo. 3). The examination of the brain showed two duramater wounds corresponding to the two scalp wounds, a subarachnoid hemorrhage and parietal and occipital brain contusions (Photo. 4).

No other traumatic injuries in the body (chest, abdomen and members) were found.

The forensic investigation performed using level blood alcohol, toxicology blood and urine samples was negative.

3. Discussion

In the literature, suicide using a power saw has been described by several authors (Asano et al., Betz and Eisenmenger, Gloulou et al., Greller and Wilske, Karger et al., Rainov and Burket). According to a literature search in English and German articles, we found 13 cases of completed suicides by means of chain saws ($n = 7$) and circular saws ($n = 6$).

Furthermore, there are a few reports of attempted suicides. Nevertheless, this method of suicide remains a rare exception. Our case will contribute more to the description of circumstances of this uncommon method of suicide.

In the literature, many types of power saws have been described such as band saw, circular saw, chain saw and hand saw. Router saws were exceptionally reported. Usually, men used power saws for suicide. Grellner and Wilske, in their case report published in 2009, described the case of a suicide by an electric saw. The woman had no experience of using a power saw. A case of a female suicide with a saw was also published in France. It was an Asian engineer who invented a very special construction similar to a guillotine so that she would not have to conduct the tool. In our case, the router saw was a tool, daily used by the decedent. Its use as a means of suicide was inspired by his occupation (a carpenter).
In the majority of literature case reports, the decedent had psychiatric disorders, especially depressive and schizophrenic history. An abuse of alcohol and/or drugs has also been described by Gloulou et al.1

Death occurs on site1 after preparing the scene of death by victim (the preparation of plastic bags described in the literature by Asano et al.3). It is in favor of a suicidal event.

Authors noted that these power tools, in cases of suicidal events, generally produce a single injury1 with or without hesitation wounds.3,4 The neck is the preferred region for self-inflicted injuries. Skull lesions like in our case are in the foreground.3 Most people directly press their head into the running circular saw and the injuries produced are immediately fatal. The particularity of our case is that the victim had lived some time after the first wound, even after the second one, the victim was even mobile.

The hypothesis of a crime had been raised, given the violent injuries. But it was removed in favour of a suicidal method (router saw) which was a working tool, the absence of disorder in the workshop with the closed door, the accessible location of the injuries without defensive injuries on the decedent body. The decedent presented two successive cranial wounds which had been performed at two different times, and there were signs of secondary movement in the workshop proved by blood stains reproducing finger shapes on the table.

The cause of death was mainly hemorrhagic shock/exsanguination. In the literature, there are sometimes indirect mechanisms leading to death like vibration with pneumothorax.

4. Conclusion

Death by an electric saw is certainly violent and suspicious. The circumstances of such suicidal cases are sometimes so strange and bizarre that homicide offences cannot be excluded at the first sight. In order to find both the cause of death and its forensic form, a forensic autopsy in addition to a (minutieuse) scene examination are the only means that allow answering these matters.

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Conflict of interest

None declared.

Ethical approval

Necessary ethical approval was obtained from the institute ethics committee.

References