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Case Report

Suicide note- A vital clue in forming opinion to cause of death

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ABSTRACT

Suicide, is one of the most painful way of death and even more so painful for the near and dear ones. Suicide note if recovered is heart breaking, as it becomes the last and one way communication from the deceased to his family/ friends. In almost 95% of cases it is written in own handwriting and consisting of 10-15 sentences or small paragraph. While there have been studies related to this and was observed that number of words usually doesn't make a difference between complete and half attempt suicide. To understand a suicide note, Relevance theory was proposed which is based on a principle that "every utterance conveys the information that it is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it". The note which was recovered from the deceased's pocket and whereby mentioning that "life had become painful and stuck in a situation from where he couldn't get out", clearly conveys about the stress and problems in his life, though did not mention clearly or any specifics. A study conducted in USA regarding the words used in suicide notes and observed that words referencing to inclusive space like "with" or "include" are not usually used which is similar to our case and it signifies isolation or lack of belongingness.

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1. Introduction

When a person ends his/her own life by taking some measures or in other words does Suicide, is one of the most painful ways of death and even more so painful for the near and dear ones. And this grief/sorrow is more aggravated when a suicide note is recovered. As it becomes the last and one way communication from the deceased to his family/ friends and it is heart breaking while going through suicide notes, as each word reminds of the pain and suffering endured by the deceased and nothing can be done about it. Suicide notes mostly describe the causes and affects which forced the person to commit such act and in process and in almost all cases they are in a mental state of depression however they don't blame anybody but themselves. While

there have been cases where they actually point to a specific person and in turn blaming them for their death. Sometimes process or procedure of suicide is also mentioned and in almost 95% of cases it is written in own handwriting and consisting of 10-15 sentences or small paragraph.¹ Though digital or computer typed notes are also common now a days. They are usually recovered from deceased pockets or in their room where the act had been done. Compared to number of suicides, presence of suicide note is very less, so it becomes a important piece of evidence to form a conclusion in cause of death and their proper preservation and analysis is of significant value. Here we present a case report, where suicide note was recovered and its significance in forming a opinion to cause of death.

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2. Case Summary

On 13.11.2018 a hanging case was brought for medicolegal autopsy at mortuary of AIIMS, Bhubaneswar. Deceased was a male of 24 years of age. He was studying at a local institute and staying at hostel at Bhubaneswar. On 12.11.2018 he had exams which he didn't attend. Subsequently on enquiring by his friends, he was found hanging inside his hostel room with door locked from inside. He was soon rescued and brought to casualty of AIIMS, Bhubaneswar where he was declared brought dead on same day. Inquest was done and autopsy started on 13.11.2018 at 12.30 pm.

2.1. Autopsy findings

Ligature mark in form of deep grooved pressure abrasion and of reddish brown colour was present around the neck (Figures 1 and 2). It starts at a point 2cm below the left angle of mandible and continues forward to front of neck and crossing over and above thyroid cartilage to right side of neck and running upward and backward to a point 6cm below the right angle of mandible and then continuing backward to hairline and disappears at a point which is 6cm below left mastoid. Circumference of pressure abrasion is 38cm and maximum breadth is 2cm at left side of neck at the mastoid region. In internal findings- Neck- skin under the ligature mark was parchmentized and tissues were intact (Figure 3). Lungs were congested and edematous and other than this, no other findings were significant.



Fig. 1: Showing ligature mark at neck



Fig. 2: Showing ligature mark



Fig. 3: Showing neck dissection findings

2.2. Ligature material

It was a plastic rope having twisted spiral pattern and of yellow colour produced in two pieces (Figure 4). Total length is about 214cm keeping knots intact. The twisted circumference of each rope is 1cm and both fiber ropes jointly has twisted circumference of 2cm.



Fig. 4: Ligature material

Subsequently a note (Figure 5) was recovered from deceased's pocket, upon reading which came out to be a

suicide note. In it, deceased has describes that his life had become painful and stuck in a situation from where he couldn't get out. Though he thanks his parents for the life they provided, he blames himself for not carrying it. He also names a person who he wishes shouldn't know about his death and ends the note with a painful and heart wrenching line- Half life is better than full. As per the history given by father, deceased was good in studies and had talked with deceased day before incident and came to know about the semester examination on next day. Also, came to know that deceased had some money problem and was not able to finish a project. According to father deceased had no suicidal tendencies. As per the history from police/ friends deceased was not eating properly since last 1 year and lost a lot of weight and was also on some sort of medications.

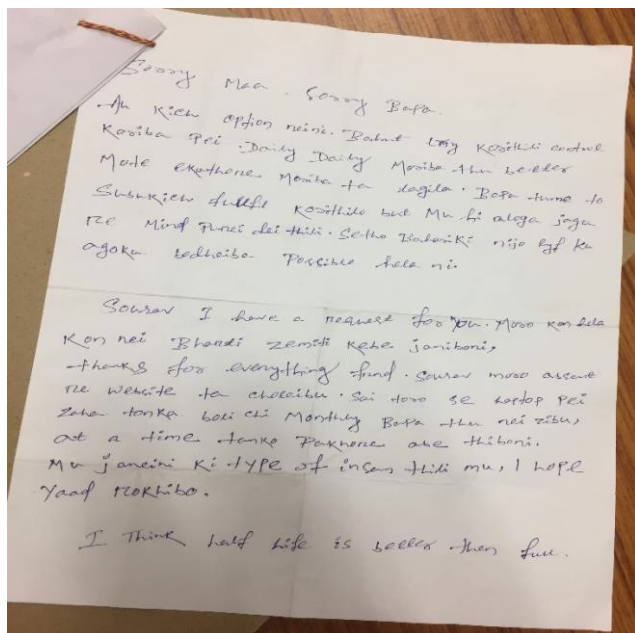


Fig. 5: Suicide note

3. Discussion

Suicide note has always been a crucial piece of evidence in investigations of suicide deaths. While going through it, one can notice or feel some kind of agony or suffering a person is going through. There have been studies to correlate handwriting of suicide note from actual and mood or emotions and it was concluded that there is no substantial difference. Handwriting represents a person's behavioural characteristic and a kind of personal identification and it can change according to mood or emotional conditions, but we observed no significant difference in actual and suicide note handwriting though mood was quite palpable in suicide note.¹ When a person pens a suicide note, it is almost completely decided that, he is going to end his life regardless of content or volume of words. While there

have been studies related to this and was observed that number of words usually doesn't make a difference between complete and half attempt suicide and is similar to our case, where the act was complete.² To understand a suicide note, a theory was proposed- Relevance theory, which is a framework for understanding the utterances.³ It was first proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, and is used within cognitive linguistics and pragmatics. Theory is based on a principle that "every utterance conveys the information that it is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it". Means every word spoken or written by someone conveys information, which needs to be analysed by the listener. The note which was recovered from the deceased's pocket and whereby mentioning that "life had become painful and stuck in a situation from where he couldn't get out". It clearly conveys about the stress and problems in his life, though did not mention clearly or any specifics. In those difficult time also he was thankful to his parents, which clearly shows that small part of him was both guilty and thankful. Though there was feel of mixed emotions throughout the letter, there was not any distinctive change in handwriting which is similar to a study. There was a study conducted in USA regarding the words used in suicide notes and observed that words referencing to inclusive space like "with" or "include" are not usually used.² This is also similar in our case and it signifies isolation or lack of belongingness.²

4. Conclusion

There are numerous definitions of Suicide but hardly an explanation to it. Taking own's life may not be an easy task but the subsequent aftereffects are most difficult to dealt with. So sudden is the nature of events that, it takes considerable time to think upon and find a significant answer to this act. Not only parents and relatives are clueless sometimes investigation agency becomes victim too. In these kind of scenarios, recovery of suicide is of immense help. Making use of sentiment analysis and linguistic features, it is possible to learn a model of emotions that is representative of suicide notes and making them differ from other notes (Love notes).⁴ Recent advances in machine learning, natural language processing and sentiment mining can be used to automatically detect emotions in suicide notes and can be helpful in suicide prevention.⁵ It has also been found that note leavers have this need for explanation stemming out from religious beliefs or presence of surviving relatives/friends and the note may provide a basis for understanding and rationalizing unexpected suicide.⁶ While there have been cases where suicide converts to homicide and vice-versa, a thorough examination of suicide note if found can solve the last piece of puzzle and gives valuable information in forming opinion to cause of death in medicolegal reports.

5. Source of Funding

None.

6. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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