

Homicide disguised as road-traffic accident: a case-report

Abstract

Road traffic accident (RTA) is one of the leading causes of death in both developing and developed countries. Usually RTA cases are very casually investigated by the police. Hence, there remains a high chance of a perpetrator escaping a meticulously planned homicide disguised as a road-traffic accident or a rail-way track accident. Gross mutilation of a body disrupts the evidence, resulting in a lack of prima-facie evidence. These are two commonly observed gaps in the investigations of RTA cases being exploited by criminals to malign a planned homicide with an accident. We have encountered a fatal accident case which was initially reported as a road traffic accident by the police and subsequently the manner of death turned out to be the result of a homicide. This has been diagnosed on post-mortem examination and crime scene investigation which helped the investigating officer conclude the manner of the case. The typical autopsy features and the crime-scene investigation provided a lead to the police-investigation team to apprehend the actual culprits. Hence, it is not prudent to rule out homicide or suicide while dealing with road or rail-way accident cases.

Keywords: road traffic, accident, homicide, post-mortem, examination, disguise

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Introduction

According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Assassination Training Manual of US (July 19, 2010), "For secret assassination, either simple or chase, the contrived accident is the most effective technique. When successfully executed, it causes little excitement and is only casually investigated". About 1.24 million people die each year as a result of road traffic accidents. Road traffic accidents are the leading cause of death among young people, aged 15–29 years. Half of those dying on the world's roads are "vulnerable road users", such as pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists. Without action, road traffic crashes are predicted to result in the deaths of around 1.9 million people annually by 2020.¹ In India, the RTA cases are usually investigated by the police under Section 304 (A) of the Indian Penal Code. And, often it is seen that RTA cases are being handled very casually by the investigating officers. Usually, there is obvious lack in-depth investigation to determine the exact manner of death. Nevertheless, similar scenarios are observed in other parts of the world, in both underdeveloped and many developed countries. Generally, vehicles are not traced in hit and run cases which are registered under S.187 of Indian motor vehicle act. Many times relatives of RTA victim are not happy with investigation because they suspect possibility of murder. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon to find meticulously planned homicide cases appear as an accident. A murdered victim may have been thrown on the road-way or on a railway-track to produce a simulated case of accident or suicide. Sometimes in RTA cases, natural deaths could be the cause of death in which injuries sustained are not sufficient to cause death. There are two commonly observed lacunae in the investigations of RTA cases:

- I. 'Gross mutilation of the body disrupting the evidence,'
- II. 'Lack of prima-facie evidence'. And, these are being exploited by the criminals to malign a planned homicide as an accident. Vehicular homicide is a crime that, in general, involves the death of an individual other than the driver as a result of either criminally negligent or murderous operation of a vehicle.² We

are reporting a fatal case which was registered as road traffic accident by the police and subsequently, after post-mortem examination and crime scene investigation, the manner of death was found to be homicide.

Case report

A 47 year old male found dead lying in prone position on road at late night. The deceased had sustained injuries over head and face. No vehicle was found at the scene. Initially, the case was registered as road traffic accident by the police and the body was shifted to a mortuary for autopsy. On examination: well-nourished and well-built adult male, 170cm long, fair complexion, had blood stained clothes which were torn in places. Black stains were found on T-shirt. Rigor mortis was present around almost all joints of the body. Post-mortem staining was well developed over back surface and fixed. Head and face were blood stained. Dried bloody discharge through right ear, angle of mouth, and nostril was detected. Left ear was intact. Both eyes were blackened. External genitalia were intact.

External injuries

- I. A laceration wound, the size of (10cmX5cmXpericranium-deep) was present over the right temporo-parietal area of scalp, irregular margin, surrounded by reddish colored abrasion, the size of (8cmX4cm) on the outer aspect of right eye.
- II. A grazed abrasion, the size of (15cmX3cm) was present on the front of chest.
- III. An abrasion with stretched skin present over the abdomen measured (28cmX20cm).
- IV. Multiple abrasions of various sizes and shapes were present over right arm, right forearm, and both side knee prominences.
- V. Abrasions were present at nape of neck, left shoulder, and right scapula with sizes of (8cmX6cm), (4cmX3cm) and (4cmX3cm) respectively.

- VI. Grazed abrasions were present on upper back (5cmX4cm), middle back (34cmX15cm) and outer aspect of right buttock (28cmX16cm).
- VII. Abraded lacerations of varying shapes and size were present on the dorsum of foot and on 1st-3rd toe on right side.
- VIII. A grazed abrasion, size of (8cmX3cm) present on back of right forearm.
- IX. A laceration wound of size (2cmX1cmXmuscle-deep) with irregular margins was present over the perianal area.
- X. Multiple small abrasions were present over dorsum of both hands and fingers.

Internal injuries

Scalp: showed diffuse extravasation corresponding to external injury No.1. Skull: Fissure fracture over right temporo-parieto-occipital bone. Fracture of base of skull at middle and posterior cranial fossa. Fracture of body of mandible on right side at junction of incisor and canine teeth. Brain: Diffuse subdural and subarachnoid haemorrhage present. Fracture of right ribs from 1st to 4th at sternocostal junction and posteriorly from 1st to 12th ribs at paravertebral line. Fracture of left ribs from 1st to 10th at posterior paravertebral line. Right lung was intact and pale and left lung shows multiple contusions with lacerations. Liver contused over inferior and posterior surface. Heart was intact, coronaries patent. Stomach contains 30ml of yellowish coloured mucoid fluid with fruity odour and mucosa congested. Fracture dislocation of thoracic vertebrae (T3 and T4). Fracture and dislocation of the lumbar vertebrae (at the level of L1–L2). Extravasation present at root of mesentery. Other viscera were intact and pale. No avulsed laceration or tyre marks found over body. Blood alcohol concentration was 30mg/dL. After reporting the autopsy findings–police registered the case under sections of suspected homicide. Further investigation by the police continued in the line of homicide until the culprits were nabbed. Now, police filed the charge sheet of homicide against the accused persons and the case is under trial in the criminal court.

Discussion

An alleged RTA case could turn into sudden natural death (e.g. ischemic heart disease^{3,4} rupture of berry aneurysm,³ acute haemorrhagic pancreatitis⁵ etc.) based on the results of a meticulous autopsy. Intentional suicide by road traffic accidents is well recognized in single occupant single car-road deaths.⁶ In another example, a husband who murdered his first wife in a staged car crash, tried to kill his second in a copycat crash was imprisoned for life. His ‘chilling and callous’ crimes, driven by an insatiable appetite for money, formed part of a fraudulent plot to pocket almost £1 million in insurance payouts.⁷ The authors, Pydiraju et al.,⁸ reported a premeditated hit and run (RTA) case with throttling.⁸ The accused first tried to kill deceased by hit and run. Later accused came to scene of crime to confirm her death. The victim Deceased was unconscious, but breathing. So accused throttled her to death.⁸ Borjas et al.,⁹ the authors during a second autopsy, revealed a case in which the perpetrator simulated homicidal death as road traffic accident. Results of the analysis of DNA suggested that the victim bled inside the vehicle and died and then, she was placed on the pavement and her husband simulated an accident.⁹ Interestingly, in the present case, we found multiple fatal injuries (impacts).

- I. Fatal head injury;
- II. Multiple rib fractures, laceration of left lung, contused liver and T3-T4 fracture dislocation (Figure 1),
- III. L1-L2 fracture with dislocation (Figure 1),
- IV. Mesenteric contusion (Figure 1), and



Figure 1 Showing multiple fracture and dislocations of vertebrae at the level of L1-L2 and T3-T4.

Along with these fatal injuries multiple grazed abrasions, abraded laceration of toes suggest dragging of body on road. Abraded stretched abdomen skin suggestive of run over of vehicle on abdomen. So we have concluded, these multiple injuries at different regions were caused by multiple impacts, though we have not found avulsed lacerations or tyre marks, typical of RTA. These typical injuries could be absent because of:

- I. Clothing of body;
- II. Deceased was well nourished and well built; and
- III. Run over injuries caused by Light (weight) motor vehicle;

During an on-scene of crime visit, we found blood stains at the spot, and an absence of break (skid) marks near the spot which suggests an act of intention by perpetrator. Black carbon stains were found on the,

- I. multiple impacts at different regions namely cranial, thoracic and abdominal (Figure 2);
- II. abrasions with stretched skin over abdomen;
- III. abraded laceration of dragging;
- IV. black carbon stains of tyre on clothes;
- V. absence of skid marks on road; and
- VI. absence of avulsed laceration and tyre marks on body,

Suggestive of a deliberate dash, with a motive of homicide made using a light motor vehicle against the intoxicated victim (the deceased person) leading to multiple fatal injuries. The cause of death is shock and haemorrhage resulting from sustained multiple blunt injuries. With this opinion, police investigated the case and found that the accused who was driving a light motor vehicle returning home after dinner with intoxicated deceased person. The accused stopped the vehicle so the deceased could urinate on the road side. When

the deceased attempted to board vehicle at front door, the accused suddenly drove car, and the deceased had fell down and was dragged for few feet. Then the accused drove car backwards running over deceased's body and once again drove forward over the body causing multiple impacts. After the act accused drove away with the vehicle.



Figure 2 Showing abraded stretched abdominal skin and impact abrasion over left temple area.

Conclusion

In alleged road traffic accident cases, the manner of death is usually accidental in nature; however, the possibility of homicide or suicide should be always eliminated as a routine protocol. A meticulous autopsy and crime-scene investigation will help determine the cause of death.

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None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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