

## SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE: UNUSUAL DEATH IN WESTERN COUNTRY. SUICIDE OR HOMICIDE?

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### SUMMARY

This case report describes a particular case of carbonized corpse, found in his burnt-out car in an isolated Palermo's west suburban zone.

The goal of this case report is to describe the shame and the social stigma related with suspicious of pedophilia and how it led a man to suicide by fire, considering that is an unusual way to die in western countries.

### Introduction

At a midsummer dawn, in Palermo's suburb, an unrecognizable carbonized corpse was found in an old burnt car, placed in the driver's seat (Figure 1). Under Public prosecutor order, the body was transferred to Palermo's Forensic Medicine Institute for further verifications.

### Material and Methods

Body external examination and complete autopsy was performed. Before the autopsy, total body Rx was performed to exclude the presence of bullet or metallic fragments into that carbonized body. Finally, routinely histological and toxicological examinations were also performed.

### Results

Body external examination showed complete carbonization with burns of IV degree, "pugilistic attitude" (Figure 2), and brittle greyish-white splinters bone with loss of the skull-cap and exposure of burnt encephalic residuals; there was heat dismemberment of all four limbs, with partial left side saving, absence of hands and feet.

Before the autopsy, total body Rx excluded the presence of bullet or metallic fragments into that carbonized body (Figure 3).

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*Received: April 1st, 2012 — Revised: April 22nd, 2012 — Accepted: May 2nd, 2012*

Autoptical examination showed at tracheal opening soot traces. The other organs had a “cooked meat” appearance. Histologic essays showed antero-lateral ventricular wall acute myocardial ischemia, myocardial hypertrophy and severe atherosclerosis of dominant right coronary, of anterior interventricular coronary and of its first diagonal branch (Figure 4). There was coagulative necrosis and multiorgan carbonization, with internal plurifocal congestion. Toxicological essays carried out on blood, were negative for heroine, benzodi-

azepines, alcohol. Carboxyhaemoglobin ratio was 8-10%. DNA analysis was performed to carry out a definitive identification.

### Discussion

Autoptical, radiological and laboratoristic findings showed that the victim was still alive when he was burning. This was confirmed by tracheal soot's presence and high HbCO blood concentration (even if HbCO ratios in closed environment, such as cars, are higher in other literature stud-



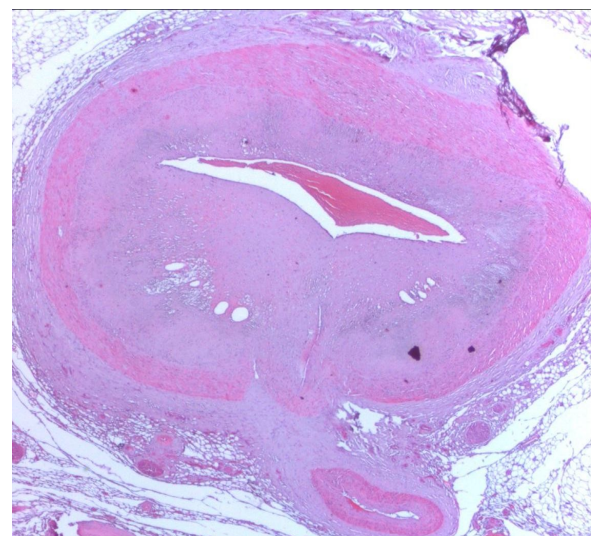
**Figure 1:** Severely burnt corpse of the victim into the car.



**Figure 2:** Details of the “pugilistic attitude” caused by a coagulation of muscle proteins when the body is exposed to extremely high temperatures.



**Figure 3:** Rx imaging before the autopsy shows the absence of bullet or metallic fragments into the carbonized body.



**Figure 4:** Histological analysis: myocardial hypertrophy and severe atherosclerosis of dominant right coronary (HE x100).

ies); bullets, exogenous substances and accelerants absence let us reasonably exclude homicide hypothesis. Likely, the pre-existing cardiopathy accelerated the death of a subject that burned himself to suicide. This pattern explains the poor vital signs showed by carbonized corpse. DNA analysis confirmed that the corpse belonged to a 64 years-old Caucasian male, disappeared during the previous evening, after being accused of sexual harassment towards his child niece. Magistracy investigations proved that the man committed suicide after this dishonourable charge.

### **Conclusion**

Self-immolation is not a common way to suicide in Western countries[1] (0.76-0.96% of all suicides); the most frequent reasons underlying self-immolation are separation from a partner or work/financial problems[2]; political and/or religious reasons are more common in Asian or Medio-Oriental countries. Most part of cases present an history of psychiatric illness and/or previous suicide attempts[3].

In this case report familiar sexual harassment accuses can be considered the cause of self-immolation suicide[4]; in literature we did not find any self-burning suicide or suicide attempt after paedophilia or sexual harassments accuses.

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