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Anny Sauvageau and Vernon J. Geberth
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Practical Forensic and Investigative Perspectives
Contents

Preface .............................................................................................................................................. xi
About the Authors ........................................................................................................................ xiii
Acknowledgments ..................................................................................................................... xv

Chapter 1  Autoerotic death: Historical context ................................................................. 1
Sexual asphyxia in fiction ........................................................................................................... 1
Anthropologists’ accounts of autoerotic asphyxia ............................................................... 2
Sexual asphyxia: Early nonscientific reports in London ........................................................ 2
Historical context of autoerotic death in forensic literature .................................................. 3
  The early period (1947 to 1980) ....................................................................................... 3
  The golden age (1981 to 1990) .......................................................................................... 4
  The turning point (1991) ..................................................................................................... 5
  The modern era .................................................................................................................... 6
The need for a modern book covering the advances on autoerotic death ......................... 6
References ................................................................................................................................. 6

Chapter 2  Definition, incidence, and best practices in approaching these deaths ...... 9
Definition ..................................................................................................................................... 9
Pitfalls in the application of the term autoerotic death ............................................................ 9
  Pitfall 1: To label a death autoerotic even though the manner of death was not accidental .. 10
  Pitfall 2: To label a death autoerotic even though the sexual activity was not solitary .... 10
  Pitfall 3: To become confused concerning the concept of an escape mechanism .......... 10
Terminology and death certification ...................................................................................... 14
Incidence of autoerotic deaths ............................................................................................... 14
  Incidence in Canada ........................................................................................................... 15
  Incidence in Europe ............................................................................................................ 16
  Incidence of autoerotic deaths in Western Countries ....................................................... 16
Variables influencing the incidence of autoerotic deaths .................................................... 16
Best practices in approaching these deaths ........................................................................ 16
  Investigation of the scene .................................................................................................. 17
  Examination of the body ................................................................................................... 17
  History ............................................................................................................................... 17
  Understanding these deaths: There are different types of sexuality ............................... 18
Definition of autoerotic deaths: Checklist for the forensic expert ....................................... 18
Incidence of autoerotic deaths: Checklist for the forensic expert ....................................... 19
Best approaches of autoerotic deaths: Checklist for the forensic expert ............................ 19
Understanding these deaths: There are different types of sexuality ........................................... 19
References ...................................................................................................................................... 19

Chapter 3  Death scene characteristics....................................................................................... 21
Death scene characteristics as main clues to the sexual autoerotic nature ................................ 21
Common scene features .................................................................................................................. 28
  Nudity and exposure of the genitals.............................................................................................. 28
  Cross-dressing ............................................................................................................................ 29
  Evidence of masturbatory activity ............................................................................................... 30
  Foreign body insertion in the anus ............................................................................................... 30
  Lubricants ................................................................................................................................ 32
  Pornography .............................................................................................................................. 33
  Mirror and video recording ........................................................................................................ 34
  Covering of the face, bondage of the genitals, other bondage, and other masochistic behavior .......................................................................................................................... 34
  Protective padding in hanging .................................................................................................... 34
  Evidence of repetitive behavior ................................................................................................. 35
Scene element forbidding ruling a death as autoerotic ................................................................. 39
A modern study of crime scene features in autoerotic death ...................................................... 45
  Incidence of individual scene features ...................................................................................... 45
  Number of scene features per case ............................................................................................ 46
  Comparison of scene features in relation to the autoerotic methods ....................................... 47
  Comparison of scene features in relation to age group ............................................................ 47
Summary ....................................................................................................................................... 48
Scene characteristics: Checklist for the forensic expert ................................................................ 48
References ...................................................................................................................................... 49

Chapter 4  Typical methods of autoerotic deaths: Hanging ......................................................... 51
Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 51
Definitions of terms ....................................................................................................................... 51
Basic pathophysiology of hanging ............................................................................................... 52
Complete suspension versus incomplete suspension .................................................................... 53
Variation of positions in autoerotic hangings ............................................................................... 57
Scene investigation ....................................................................................................................... 59
Body examination ......................................................................................................................... 68
  Neck furrow .............................................................................................................................. 68
  Petechiae .................................................................................................................................. 69
  Cyanosis, congestion, protrusion of the tongue ......................................................................... 70
  Fractures of the neck structures ............................................................................................... 71
New data on the pathophysiology of hanging: The Working Group on Human Asphyxia ....... 72
  The agonic sequence in hanging .............................................................................................. 72
  Respiratory responses to hanging ............................................................................................. 75
  Study of filmed hangings casts doubt on the traditional conception of the pathophysiology of hanging ....................................................................................................................... 76
  Agonal responses to hanging in complete versus incomplete suspension ............................. 76
  Role of ischemic habituation on the agonal responses to hanging in autoerotic practitioners ................................................................................................................................. 77
  Role of ethanol in the agonal responses to hanging .................................................................. 77
Chapter 5  Typical methods of autoerotic deaths: Asphyxia by plastic bags and chemical substances ................................................................. 83
Introduction ................................................................................................. 83
Definitions of terms .................................................................................... 83
Autoerotic deaths by smothering by plastic bags over the head ................ 84
  Scene investigation .................................................................................. 85
  Autopsy findings .................................................................................... 85
  Pathophysiology of smothering ............................................................... 85
  Pathophysiology of smothering: New data from the working group on human asphyxia ................................................................. 86
Autoerotic deaths by suffocation on chemical substances ......................... 88
  Gaseous hydrocarbons ........................................................................ 92
  Anesthetic compounds ........................................................................ 92
  Inhalants: Glue, solvents, aerosols ...................................................... 93
  Other chemicals .................................................................................. 95
Scene investigation .................................................................................... 99
Pathophysiology of propane-related deaths: New data from the Working Group on Human Asphyxia ................................................................. 99
  Implications for toxicology and pathology ........................................... 100
  Implications for crime scene interpretation ........................................ 102
Typical methods of autoerotic deaths: Checklist for the forensic expert .... 102
Definitions of terms: Checklist for the forensic expert .......................... 102
Autoerotic deaths by smothering by plastic bags over the head: Checklist for the forensic expert .......................................................... 102
Autoerotic deaths by suffocation on chemical substances: Checklist for the forensic expert ................................................................. 103
References ............................................................................................ 103

Chapter 6  Atypical methods of autoerotic deaths .................................... 105
Introduction ............................................................................................ 105
Electrocution ............................................................................................ 105
  Examples from the literature .............................................................. 105
Overdressing/body wrapping .................................................................. 107
  Examples from the literature .............................................................. 107
Foreign body insertion ............................................................................ 119
  Examples from the literature .............................................................. 119
Atypical asphyxia methods ..................................................................... 122
  Definition of terms: The classification of asphyxia ............................ 122
  Ligature strangulation ...................................................................... 123
  Chest compression ............................................................................ 126
Inverted or abdominal suspension................................................................. 126
Immersion and drowning.............................................................................. 127
Smothering..................................................................................................... 129
Other atypical methods.............................................................................. 133
Atypical methods of autoerotic deaths: Checklist for the forensic expert 137
References .................................................................................................. 138

Chapter 7  Atypical victims ......................................................................... 141
Introduction ................................................................................................. 141
Female victims ............................................................................................ 141
Female victims in the early period of forensic literature on autoerotic deaths
(1947 to 1980) .......................................................................................... 141
Female victims in the golden age of forensic literature on autoerotic deaths
(1981 to 1990) ......................................................................................... 142
Female victims in the modern era of forensic literature on autoerotic deaths
(1991 to present) .................................................................................. 143
Non-white victims ........................................................................................ 147
Teenager and elderly victims ...................................................................... 147
Atypical victims: Checklist for the forensic expert .................................... 156
References ................................................................................................. 157

Index .......................................................................................................... 159
Preface

Autoerotic Deaths

Practical Forensic and Investigative Perspectives is the result of a meticulous collaboration and friendship between a former New York detective and homicide commander, who is now an international homicide and forensic consultant, and an experienced forensic pathologist, who is the chief medical examiner of Alberta and an internationally recognized authority on asphyxial death. This book is the result of a unique combination of the knowledge and experience of a dedicated murder cop who has seen it all and that of a passionate scientist whose research in the field has modernized the concepts around autoerotic deaths. The two authors have enjoyed multiple conversations during which the new data of the science met the concrete examples of case studies. This is what this book is all about: presenting a scientific modern view of autoerotic death, with case illustrations.

Autoerotic Deaths: Practical Forensic and Investigative Perspectives will become the benchmark and “best practice” model for professional death investigations involving autoerotic deaths because it will provide practical and conventional information based on scientific research and case experience from the field with a wide variety of exquisite case histories.

Throughout this textbook, we reference additional resource information as well as case examples of the application of various tactics, procedures, and forensic techniques along with full-color illustrations, explanations, and tables to assist the reader in understanding the dynamics of autoerotic deaths.

In Chapter 1, a historical context of the evolution of the concept of sexual asphyxia and autoerotic death is presented. The appearance and development of the phenomenon is followed from the early nonscientific reports in the French literature and the whores' houses of London, through the early scientific reports (1947 to 1980), the golden age of the wide development of the field mainly under the team of Hazelwood (1981 to 1990), to the turning point of a revolutionary paper by Byard and Bramwell (1991) and the modern era that followed.

In Chapter 2, the definition of autoerotic death is presented, along with the pitfalls in the application of the term autoerotic: (1) to label a death autoerotic even though the manner of death was not accidental, (2) to label a death autoerotic even though the sexual asphyxia was not solitary, and (3) to become confused concerning the concept of an escape mechanism. The incidence of autoerotic death is reviewed, and the best practices in approaching these deaths are discussed.

In Chapter 3, the death scene characteristics are explored. As the main clues to the autoerotic nature of a death are at the scene, this chapter is particularly important. The most
common scene features are exposure of genitals, pornography, nudity, cross-dressing, and bondage.

The methods of autoerotic deaths are explored in Chapters 4–6. The most common method of autoerotic death is hanging (explored in Chapter 4), followed at some distance by asphyxia by plastic bags and chemical substances (Chapter 5). Unusual methods are presented in Chapter 6: electrocution, overdressing/body wrapping, foreign body insertion, and atypical asphyxia.

Finally, Chapter 7 discusses the atypical victims of autoerotic deaths: the female victims, the non-white victims, the teenager, and elderly victims.

We would like to particularly thank Mark Benecke, international forensic research and consulting, for his contribution to Chapters 4 and 5 and Brian Wilson, director of production, Medicolegal Art (Atlanta, GA) for his exquisite medical drawings and illustrations.

Autoerotic Deaths: Practical Forensic and Investigative Perspectives presents a complete analysis of all aspects of autoerotic deaths. Our goal was to develop a comprehensive resource text that could serve as a practical guide for those involved in the investigation of such deaths. We hope readers will appreciate the combination of theory and practice, with this unique combination of the most up-to-date science presented in parallel to a more practical, down-to-earth case history format.

Anny Sauvageau and Vernon J. Geberth
About the Authors

Anny Sauvageau, MD, MSc, Chief Medical Examiner, Alberta, Canada

Dr. Anny Sauvageau started her career as a forensic pathologist in Montreal in 2002. In 2009, she moved to Alberta, Canada, where she was named deputy chief medical examiner in 2010 and chief medical examiner in 2011. She is an associate clinical professor at the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary and a well-known world expert on asphyxia. She received her medical degree from the University of Montreal in 1996 and was board certified in anatomical pathology in 2002. She has a founder designation in forensic pathology from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada in recognition of her significant contribution to the development of this new specialty in Canada. From 2007 to 2012, she was vice president of the Forensic Pathology Examination Board of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. She is also one of the founders and the program director of the residency program in forensic pathology at the University of Alberta. She is the author of more than 75 papers in peer-reviewed forensic journals and a much sought-after international speaker. She is the founder of the Working Group on Human Asphyxia and the cofounder of the International Network for Forensic Research. Her innovative approach toward forensic research has significantly improved the understanding of the pathophysiology of hanging and other types of strangulation.

Vernon J. Geberth, MS, MPS, BBA, Lieutenant Commander (Ret.) NYPD, Practical Homicide Investigation® (http://www.practicalhomicide.com)

Commander Vernon Geberth is a retired lieutenant commander of the New York City Police Department with over 40 years of law enforcement experience. He has an undergraduate degree in business administration and holds dual master’s degrees in forensic psychology and criminal justice. Commander Geberth is a graduate of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) National Academy and is also a Fellow in the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS).
Lieutenant Commander Geberth is the author of *Practical Homicide Investigation: Tactics, Procedures, and Forensic Techniques*, now in its fourth edition and recognized in the law enforcement field as “the bible of homicide investigation,” and the *Practical Homicide Investigation Checklist and Field Guide*, which is considered by professionals an essential prerequisite in conducting proficient death inquiries. Commander Geberth is also the author of *Sex-Related Homicide and Death Investigation: Practical and Clinical Perspectives*, Second Edition, which is considered the framework textbook on sex-related murder.

Commander Geberth is a nationally renowned lecturer, author, educator, consultant, and expert witness on the subject of death investigation. He has appeared on numerous local, national, and international television programs to answer questions on the subject of murder and provide insight, analysis, and commentary with respect to all aspects of homicide and death investigations. Geberth has been referenced as a media consultant on myriad national major cases across the United States and Canada. Over 65,000 members from over 8,000 law enforcement agencies have attended Geberth’s Practical Homicide Investigation seminars.

In his seminars, Geberth focuses on advanced tactics, procedures, and forensic techniques and presents equivocal death, suicide, and missed investigations as well as serial murder investigation and the application of abnormal psychology to the investigative process.
# Acknowledgments

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Name</th>
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<tbody>
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chapter one

Autoerotic death

Historical context

Sexual asphyxia in fiction

Long before becoming of forensic interest, erotic asphyxia had been described in fiction. The Marquis de Sade depicted erotic strangulation and hanging in his book Justine, published in 1791:

He seizes my arms, binds them to my side, then he slips a black silken noose about my neck; he holds both ends of the cord and, by tightening, he can strangle and dispatch me to the other world either quickly or slowly, depending upon his pleasure. “This torture is sweeter than you may imagine, Therese,” says Roland; “you will only approach death by way of unspeakably pleasurable sensations; the pressure this noose will bring to bear upon your nervous system will set fire to the organs of voluptuousness; the effect is certain…. Therese, it’s the rope that’s waiting for me. … I am as firmly persuaded as I can possibly be that this death is infinitely sweeter than cruel; but as the women upon whom I have tested its initial anguishes have never really wished to tell me the truth, it is in person I wish to be made acquainted with the sensation. By way of the experience itself I want to find out whether it is not very certain this asphyxiation impels, in the individual who undergoes it, the erectory nerve to produce an ejaculation; once convinced this death is but a game. … You will do to me everything I did to you; I’ll strip; I’ll mount the stool, you’ll adjust the rope, I’ll excite myself for a moment, then, as soon as you see things assume a certain consistency, you’ll jerk the stool free and I’ll remain hanging; you’ll leave me there until you either discern my semen’s emission or symptoms of death’s throes.” … We take our stations; Roland is stimulated by a few of his usual caresses; he climbs upon the stool, I put the halter round his neck. … I do so; his dart soon rises to menace Heaven, he himself gives me the sign to remove the stool, I obey; would you believe it, Madame? nothing more true than what Roland had conjectured: nothing but symptoms of pleasure ornament his countenance and at practically the same instant rapid jets of semen spring nigh to the vault. When ‘tis all shot out without any assistance whatsoever from me, I rush to cut him down, he falls, unconscious, but thanks to my ministrations he quickly recovers his senses. “Oh Therese!” he exclaims upon opening his eyes, “oh, those sensations are not to be described; they transcend all one can possibly say.”
In 1833, in an anonymous book attributed to Alfred de Musset (Gamiani ou Deux Nuits d’Excès), a hanging is described that caused an erection in a previously sexually exhausted man. Jean Giono, another French author, portrayed the traditional autoerotic asphyxi to a leather cowl among mountain people in the 19th century (Faust au Village).

Sexual hanging is also exposed in the German literature. At the beginning of the 20th century, Hanns Heinz Ewers wrote about sexual asphyxia in a book called Ahraune and in a short story. In Ahraune, a decadent law student blithely suggests that his wealthy scientist uncle artificially create a woman, as outlined in the legend of the fertility powers of the mandrake (or alraune) root. The uncle and the nephew collect the semen of a condemned murderer, ejected at the moment of hanging, and a prostitute is impregnated.

In the mid-20th century, there is an allusion to erection caused by hanging in the play Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett.

Vladimir: ... What do we do?
Estragon: Wait.
Vladimir: Yes, but while waiting.
Estragon: What about hanging ourselves?
Vladimir: Hum. It’d give us an erection.
Estragon: (highly excited) An erection!
Vladimir: With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow. That's why they shriek when you pull them up. Did you not know that?
Estragon: Let's hang ourselves immediately.

Anthropologists’ accounts of autoerotic asphyxia

It is alleged that asphyxial games play a role in the sexuality of some other cultures. It seems that the Eskimos were known to choke each other as part of their sexual activity, and that it was common for their children to suspend themselves by the neck in playing games.1 Similarly, it was alleged that the Yaghans of South America had asphyxial practices.2 It has also been said that some Oriental lovers were grabbing each other’s throat to enhance sexual pleasure.3 However, it is rather difficult to distinguish myth from reality in these accounts.

The origin of autoerotic asphyxia in Western culture is not known. It is sometimes alleged that it might have come from the experiences of French Foreign Legionnaires who had been stationed in French Indochina (now Vietnam).

Sexual asphyxia: Early nonscientific reports in London

It is known that in the 17th century, prostitutes in London were using controlled strangulation as a cure for impotence and to enhance the pleasure of clients.4,5

Peter Anthony Motteux, a Huguenot refugee in London known for his completion of the translation of Rabelais’s Gargantua and Pantagruel and his translation of Cervantes’s Don Quixote, is probably the first recorded victim of autoerotic asphyxiation.6 Though his death in 1718 was not considered sexually related at the time, a modern review of the case reveals that the man died in a London brothel of what seems to be assisted erotic asphyxia. Furthermore, an undated, unsigned marginal note in an old book on the lives of poets in the British library claimed, referring to Motteux, he “is suppos’d to have been strangled by Whores, who forgot to cut the cord They had ty’d abt his neck to provoke venery.”7,6
Chapter one: Autoerotic death

Frantisek Kotzwara, a Czech composer known mainly for The Battle of Prague, is another early recorded victim of erotic asphyxiation. On February 2, 1791, the same year as the publication of Justine by the Marquis de Sade, the musician visited a prostitute while in London. After dinner with her, it seems that Kotzwara paid her and requested that she cut off his testicles. The prostitute refused, and Kotzwara tied a ligature around the doorknob, fastened the other end around his neck, had sexual intercourse with the prostitute, and died. The prostitute, Susannah Hill, was subsequently tried for Kotzwara’s murder, but the jury chose to believe her testimony, and she was acquitted. To avoid a public scandal, the court records of the case were ordered destroyed. It seems, however, that a copy was made and used to produce a pamphlet about the incident.

Historical context of autoerotic death in forensic literature

It is sometimes claimed that the earliest medical report of an autoerotic death is found in an old French monograph by de Boismont on suicide in 1856. The sexual nature of the case, however, is not convincing: A 12-year-old boy was found hanging and, after being revived, stated that he had no desire to end his life but had a sudden urge to try to hang himself.

The early period (1947 to 1980)

In 1947, Simpson was the first to report a case in the United States: “A naked youth was found in a lavatory hanging half off the edge of the seat, the penis turgid and dribbling semen, suspended from the neck by a rope to the inlet pipe of the cistern above. Several front page nudes from a picture newspaper were laid out in a half ring in front of him on the floor. Death was due to vagal inhibition and must have taken place suddenly, without warning. These cases must not be mistaken for suicides; they are accidental deaths.”

In 1953, Stearns brought to light a similar pattern in these bizarre deaths and suspected a syndrome related to masochism. He described having observed one or two cases a year in Massachusetts between 1941 and 1950. From then, several cases started to be described. In 1957, Ford described six cases of autoerotic death, followed in 1960 by four cases reported by Johnstone et al., and additional cases in 1963 by Usher. In France, two cases were described by Van Hecke and Timperman.

In 1960, Mant not only described three cases but also proposed criteria for the diagnosis:

1. Evidence of asphyxia produced by strangulation, by either ligature or hanging, in which the position of the body, or the presence of protective measures such as padding about the neck, indicated that death was not obviously intended;
2. Evidence of sexual activity usually in the form of masturbation or perversion, especially Transvestism;
3. No well-defined evidence for suicide or minimal evidence of suicidal ideation or behavior;
4. Evidence of repetitive episodes.

Footnotes:
1 It seems that a sexual syndrome was described earlier in the German literature, starting in 1926, in a paper by Ziemke in Archiv für Kriminologie (78:262). The German literature was not accessible, however, to most forensic experts and remained unknown to them.