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Editorial

Unraveling the untold; the role of psychological autopsy

When a patient dies under ambiguous circumstances; an “equivocal death” where the line between natural, accidental, suicidal, or homicidal circumstances is not clear, the clinicians rely on the forensic pathologist for answers. Traditional post-mortem examinations are designed to identify the biological cause of death: the physiological mechanism, the toxicological reports, the physical “how” of the circumstances. Yet, for those who left behind, the clinicians and those who cared for the deceased, the “how” is often a hollow consolation. The real question that haunts almost always is “why?”

This is where the psychological autopsy; a retrospective, interdisciplinary reconstruction of a person’s mental state and life circumstances prior to death becomes an essential tool. Since its inception in the late 1950s by Shneidman and Farberow, the psychological autopsy has evolved significantly. While earlier models provided a necessary structural foundation for the psychological autopsy, newer approaches emphasize a more “humane” and flexible methodology for the analysis, focusing more on the specific socio-cultural characteristics of the deceased rather than forcing a grieving family or the people the victim knew to provide “prefixed answers” in a format of an interview.

The current issue of the *Galle Medical Journal* features a case report authored by Warushahennadi, Mendis and Ilayperuma where a case of drowning and related issues were investigated utilizing psychological autopsy as a tool. By meticulous collection of data that are likely to help reconstruct the psychosocial environment of the deceased individual, the authors have used psychological autopsy to understand circumstances of the death.

The investigators have been trained to foster a relationship of trust to increase the chances of uncovering the “psychological traces” that remain alive with the people the victim knew. Special training emphasizing on “trauma-informed communication skills” ensure to make the process supportive as well as investigative.

However, these techniques raise profound ethical questions regarding post-mortem privacy and “informational rights” after death. Just because we can reconstruct a “mind” from data obtained at psychological autopsy, it does not always mean that we should do so without a dedicated ethical framework.

¹Edwin S. Shneidman. The Psychological Autopsy. *American Psychologist*. 1994; **49**(1): 75-76.

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