

Case Report

Two fatal cases of child abuse in which neighbors were unaware of the victims' disappearance for a long period

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Abstract

We describe two fatal cases of child abuse in which neighbors were unaware of the victims' disappearance for 1.5 months and 1 year, respectively. Recently, there have been fatal child abuse cases in which neighbors have been aware of the signs of the abuse but not notified the Child Care Authorities. Lack of concern about child welfare in the community is the greatest obstacle to protecting children at risk of abuse. The most effective means of preventing child abuse is to educate the community about how to recognize the signs of abuse and to inform the authorities. We emphasize that the community has an obligation to protect children against crime, including child abuse.

The roles of the Social Services in preventing child abuse have been extended. Forensic pathologists are required to play a key role in child abuse prevention, and in Japan their activity should be extended to the administrative field.

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1. Introduction

Child abuse has been recognized as a widespread social problem since the early 1960s [1]. This can include physical and sexual violence, neglect or mental abuse, and has reached epidemic proportions in some industrialized countries [2]. It is a problem of great public concern, and has gained wide attention among pediatricians, psychiatrists, social workers, forensic pathologists, and workers in other fields. In Japan, a new law came into effect in 2000, giving the government legal powers to challenge the custody rights of abusive parents. This law obliges doctors, nurses, teachers and welfare officials to be on the lookout for early signs of child abuse and to report it to the authorities. Even so, many children still die as a result of abuse. We have previously reported a case of severe neglect of a 3-year, 20-day-old girl who died of starvation [3]. Although

several doctors, health visitors, public health practitioners and welfare workers had expressed concern about this case, they were unable to save the child. Such workers should be recognized as playing a key role in the protection and care of children. Another major problem is failure by the public to notify the Child Care Authorities about child abuse, even when it is recognized.

In this report, we describe two fatal cases of child abuse in which neighbors were unaware of the victims' disappearance for 1.5 months and 1 year, respectively, and highlight the problems of social attitudes to child abuse.

2. Case report

Case 1. A boy aged 1 year and 6 months was punched by his father because he had consumed snacks and juice without permission. He was found dead in bed by his mother the following morning. The father did not call the ambulance or the police, and in order to prevent the victim's body from

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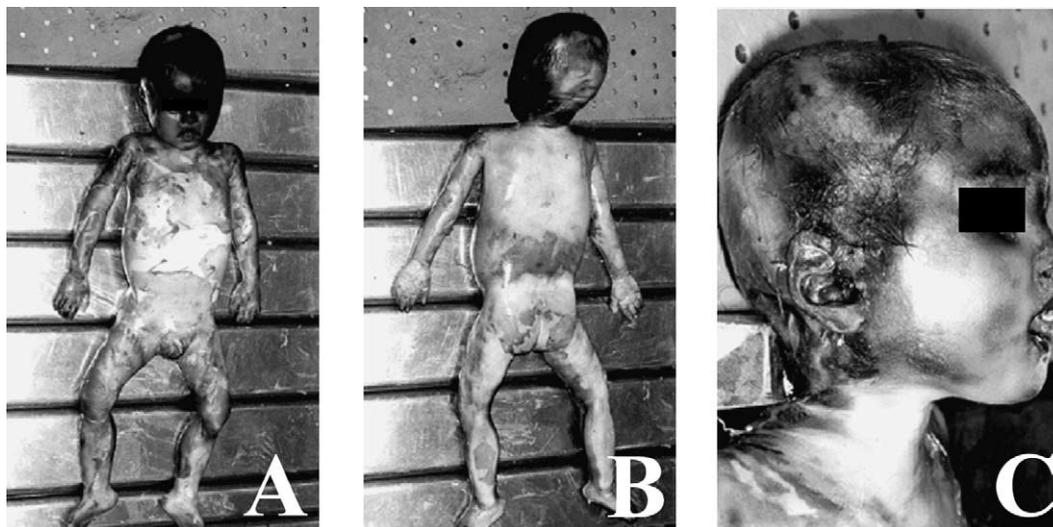


Fig. 1. Case 1. (A) View of the victim in the supine position. (B) View of the victim in the prone position. (C) Bruising is evident on the chin and the left mandibular area.

putrefying, he placed ice pillar on both sides of the victim. One and a half months later, the father committed suicide by hanging. This case surfaced only after the father's death, and we performed a judicial autopsy on the dead child. Old subcutaneous hemorrhages were observed on the trunk, thighs, chin, and in the bilateral mandibular and occipital areas (Fig. 1). The left cerebral hemisphere was light reddish, suggesting that the cause of death of the victim might have been subdural hemorrhage (Fig. 2).

Case 2. A 3-year, 5-month-old girl who had been living with her parents, four brothers and six sisters was reported to have been missing for more than 1 year. The police interrogated her mother, and on the basis of her statements the victim was found in a coolerbox on the veranda. About 1 year previously, the mother had found the victim lying dead

on the floor, and had wrapped her in a blanket and a plastic bag and hidden the body in a closet. The following summer, in response to complaints from a neighbor about the stench, the victim's body had been transferred to the coolerbox. The body was badly decomposed and adipoceratous (Fig. 3), and the stomach was ruptured (Fig. 4). These findings suggested that the victim had suffered blunt force to the abdomen. However, because of the severe postmortem changes, the cause of death could not be determined with certainty.

3. Discussion

We have previously reported a 3-year, 20-day-old girl who had died of starvation as a result of severe neglect [3,4].

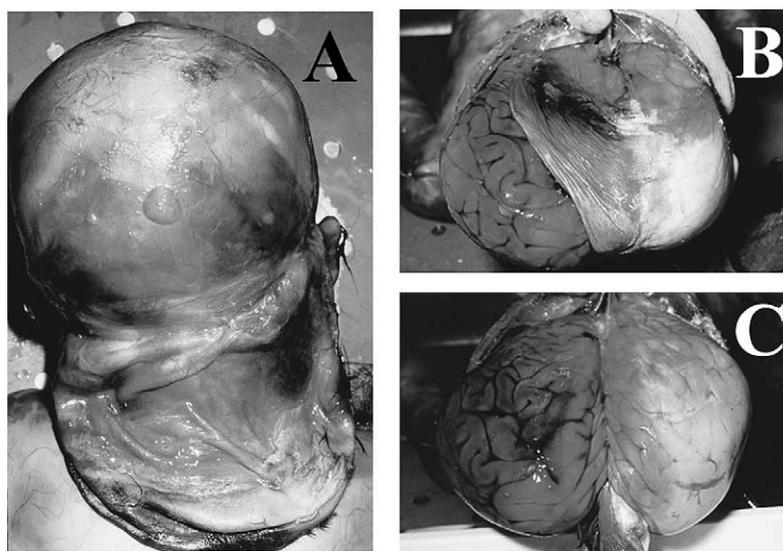


Fig. 2. Case 1. (A) Localized hemoglobin infiltration is evident in the bilateral occipital areas. (B) Localized hemoglobin infiltration is evident on the dura mater. (C) Hemoglobin infiltration is present on the surface of the left cerebral hemisphere.

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