

DEATH DIAGNOSTIC

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Diagnosis of death may not pose a problem now a days, but there was a time when in the absence of modern diagnostic gadgetry, misdiagnosis of death was not uncommon. In the past death was diagnosed on the basis of stoppage of heartbeat and respiration. Consequently many cases of false death were diagnosed. In nineteenth century in France a recluse lady was pronounced dead by six qualified physicians applying the usual tests and a death certificate was issued. For some reasons she was not buried for two weeks and on the fourteenth day she came back to life. In nineteen fifties a person was diagnosed dead in Quetta Sandeman Hospital by very experienced resident medical officer and the dead body was transferred to the mortuary to be buried later. Next day the relatives found the dead person sitting on the table and smoking a 'beedi' much to the chagrin of the doctor.

Misdiagnosis of death and premature burial were so rampant in nineteenth century Europe, that about two hundred books were written on such topics as "The uncertainty of the Signs of Death" and "One Thousand Buried Alive by their Best Friends". Numerous societies were formed to guard against the possibilities of misdiagnosis of death and people took precautions against 'live burial'.

The novelist and journalist Edmund Yates (died 1894) left instructions for his jugular vein to be severed before burial. The operatic composer Giacomo Meyerbeer (died 1864) arranged to have bells tied to his extremities so that any movement on his part before or after he was placed in coffin would call attention to the fact that he was still alive. Harriet Martineau (died 1876), the writer left her doctor ten pounds to amputate her head before burial. Col. P. Vollum of the U.S. Army Medical Corp. put forward a plan that anyone buried without autopsy or without having been embalmed should be interred with a bottle of Chloroform within reach so that if he revived he could end his life with a minimum of suffering.

In addition to premature burial, misdiagnosis of death has legal, religious and occult dimensions. To guard against misdiagnosis the physician ought to be aware of those conditions which simulate death. These conditions may be conveniently grouped under the general head of 'Suspended Animation'. Other synonyms for suspended animation are 'Apparent Death', 'Death Trance' 'More Putative'. A general understanding of 'Suspended Animation' and its implications will be of good stead to the reader.

Suspended animation is a condition of the living body in which all the activities that characterise life such as movement, respiration and beating of the heart are temporarily suspended giving the appearance of death according to clinical diagnosis.

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Suspended animation can be brought about voluntarily by certain people. It may occur in certain clinical conditions. It is also seen among the animals.

Col. Townsend's case (1733) is a well authenticated and famous example of voluntary suspended animation. He demonstrated his ability in front of three eminent doctors by undergoing suspended animation, the heartbeat and respiration becoming inaudible and the pulse imperceptible within half an hour. The doctors examined him and took him for dead and were about to go for arranging a funeral when they noticed some movement. After another half an hour he was his real self vibrating with life once again. Certain Yogis are also able to perform this feat. They can remain buried in grave for weeks on end with hardly any perceptible signs of life. When they are taken out of the grave, they can revive themselves at will. Suspended animation also occurs in clinical conditions like shock, new born infant, drowning, anaesthesia, cerebral concussion, electrocution and sunstroke. Such cases may tax the skill of the physician and inexperience and carelessness on his part may lead to misdiagnosis of death with hazardous results. Hibernation and aestivation are examples of suspended animation in animals. A hamster can live inert for months with breath rate falling to 1%. In bat during hibernation heart beat falls from 180 to 3 beats per minute and breathing from 8 breaths per second to 8 per minute.

In another form of suspended animation known as "anabiosis", Alaskan and Siberian insects remain lifeless, frozen solid until late spring when they revive. Scientists are experimenting whether large warm blooded animals could be made to "die" by instantaneous freezing and then by revived by warmth in the same manner. If they succeed, the process may be applied to astronauts on long journeys through space lasting many decades, thus saving them the boredom and emotional stress of flights and surviving without food, water or atmosphere and without ageing. Cryosurgery is another practical application of the principle underling anabiosis.

CORRIGENDUM

The Address of Dr. M. Subhan Qureshi, Co-author in the article "Development of enzyme immunoassay and its role in reproductive endocrinology: JAMC Vol. 6, No. 1, 1993 is in-correctly given. It should read as :

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