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COVID-19 instigates resurgence of ‘needless autopsies’ issue in India

COVID-19 has swamped the entire world and turned into a pandemic. Its high contagiousness compelled authorities to categorize all autopsies as ‘high risk’ considering the risk of exposure to the healthcare workers. In India, the Criminal Procedure Code authorizes investigating police officer to hold an inquest into suspicious deaths. The present article draw attention towards the ‘needless autopsies’ in times of COVID-19 and emphasizes on causes and recommendations.

Wuhan, the capital of Hubei, China, reported the first case of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which causes serious respiratory illness in human. Its causative agent belongs to coronavirus family, like SARS-CoV and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and has been named as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2).\(^1\) Expeditiously, COVID 19 outbreak spread across China and swamped the entire world, unfolding into a pandemic. The Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens within the Health and Safety Executive has categorized SARS-CoV-2 as a HG3 (hazard group 3 organisms).\(^2\) SARS-CoV-2 is transmitted via respiratory droplets through inhalation or contaminated surfaces. The effect of this highly contagious virus was such that, almost all the affected countries went into a lockdown, limiting movements of the entire population. Autopsies have been categorized as ‘high risk’ for the risk of exposure to health care workers (HCWs).\(^3\) Considering the infectivity rate (R\(_0\)) of the disease, even the handling and performance of the last rites of the infected body are being regulated with due infection prevention and control measures.

Section 174 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), India, authorizes the investigating police officer to hold an inquest into suspicious, and unnatural deaths.\(^4\) ‘Unnatural deaths’ include death resulting from suicides, homicides, accidents, animal attack, and occupational mishaps etc. In India, sudden deaths, without any certified cause of death are labelled as medicolegal, and autopsy is conducted to find the cause of death. In India, under the aegis of aforesaid Section 174 CrPC, innumerable cases are referred for medico-legal autopsy that should be considered as highly needless. The term ‘needless autopsy’, encompasses the hospitalized unnatural as well as natural deaths where cause of death can be certified by the treating doctor. The mechanism and pathophysiology is well-understood in deaths occurring in hospital due to head injuries, injuries to other vital organs, multiple fractures, burns, etc., following an act of homicide, suicide or an accident. Such cases, though designated as MLC at the time of hospital admission, have well documented clinical case records, even the course following trauma, and the cause of death. In all such cases, it is deemed unnecessary to conduct autopsy to find the cause of death, which is already well-established and documented by the treating doctor.

Reasons for carrying out such needless autopsies emanates from the reluctance and resistance at various levels. Despite of the provisions in

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autopsy were suffering from COVID-19. In absence of mandatory pre-autopsy testing, confirmation of the COVID-19 status of all bodies brought for autopsy in itself is a distant reality. Autopsies are considered as aerosol generating high-risk procedure, and lack of infrastructure, infection control measures, and personal protective equipment (PPE) make the matters even worse. Thus, in order to save the HCWs from acquiring the infection, deliberations are focusing on switching over to non-invasive or minimally invasive autopsy techniques or performing partial autopsy or even no autopsy at all.1,11–13 The most significant move to protect the HCWs, however, lies in avoiding the ‘needless’ autopsies, thereby minimizing the chances of unnecessary exposure to SARS-CoV-2. Besides, this is likely to reduce the existing load of autopsies on the resource limited medicolegal facilities14 during these challenging times. There can be no justification for risking the life of a healthcare worker for a non-justifiable cause of performing unnecessary autopsies.

It would not be incorrect to say that ‘needless autopsies’ are not only a futile exercise, and waste of manpower and resources, it exposes the HCWs to a number of infections. Besides, it also amounts to unnecessary mutilation of the body, and disregard for the dead. Though the issue of ‘needless autopsies’ has been deliberated in the past,8–9 never was it taken so seriously, as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the facts of the matter, exemption of post-mortem examination in all cases with well-established cause and manner of death based on the hospital records, and investigating officer’s report on the circumstances of death, respectively, should be deemed justified.

Authors’ contribution

UP & TK contributed equally.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as hono-
raria; educational grants; participation in speakers’ bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript that could inappropriately influence (bias) our work. Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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