

Pregnant Woman Who Required Autopsy Customarily In A Developing Community



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Abstract

One of the three major Ethnic Groups in Nigeria is the Ibo or Igbo who are domiciled mostly in South Eastern Nigeria. A British anthropologist lived among them and wrote an intimate book about their customs. Not explicitly written was that a woman should not be buried with an unborn child, if she dies during childbirth. Actually, this custom sprang up in this particular case. It needs documentation, especially as the underlying meningitis is shown to have interested gynecologists in The Netherlands, Zimbabwe, Kuwait, USA, and Canada.

Keywords : Pregnancy; Child Birth; Meningitis; Death; Custom; Autopsy; Igbo

Introduction

GT Basden, a British anthropologist, wrote an intimate book on the Ibo or Igbo ethnic group [1]. However, he did not include what happened when a woman died during labor. Apparently, not long ago, the family did insist on the baby being removed in order to bury it separately. As one such case occurred at the then Enugu Specialist Hospital, Enugu, the entire history is worthy of documentation.

Case Report

MO, 26-year-old Igbo woman gravida 4, para 3, was admitted to the Ward. This was at 32 weeks gestation. She was suffering from headache and restlessness. A provisional diagnosis of Cerebro-spinal Accident or Meningitis was entertained. Unfortunately, she died the next day. The problem cropped up thus: "The relatives are seriously requesting separation of mother and baby before they take the body away. According to them, it is an abomination to bury both together." Accordingly, I undertook the demanded post mortem examination. The body was that of a poorly nourished woman. A mass in the lower abdomen arose from the pelvis. There was crusted blood in the oral passages of the baby. On her mother's side, purulent exudates were found on reflecting the skull. There was no abscess or source of the infection. The uterus was much enlarged and contained a female fetus. In addition, the chest showed that both lungs were distended with edema fluid. Thus, both intracranial and pulmonary diseases were sufficient to explain her unexpected death.

Discussion

Death in pregnancy has been reported in this community with reference to renal carcinoma [2], but not as regards intracranial infection. In the Netherlands [3], the problem was pursued with 6 cases who suffered from bacterial meningitis, two of them dying due to florid septic shock. Single case reports came from Zimbabwe on account of cryptococcal infection [4], from Kuwait where *Listeria monocytogenes* featured [5], and from USA due to *Streptococcus pneumoniae* [6]. According to Canadian authors [7], tuberculous meningitis stands out because it is "an insidious disease presenting a diagnostic challenge to even an astute practitioner". In this context, the good news is that "when recognized early and treated effectively with modern antituberculous medication, prognosis for mother and child is greatly improved." Unfortunately, the local case did not survive long enough for both investigation and medication.

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