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Neonaticides Following “Secret” Pregnancies: Seven Case Reports

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Synopsis

Seven neonaticides were reported during a 14-month period in the State of Iowa. This is an alarming number considering that only one such case was reported in the previous year. The majority of cases involved the birth of a live infant to an adolescent who had reportedly kept her pregnancy

secret from family and friends. The death of the infants resulted from exposure or drowning. Efforts were made by the mother to hide or dispose of her infant's body.

Basic information about each of the reported cases is presented, as well as the sentences given the adult mothers charged with the crime of child endangerment. The dynamics of these cases are reviewed in the context of earlier studies dealing with the phenomenon of neonaticide.

Infanticide has deep roots in several cultures. It was practiced in some primitive societies and was decreed a capital offense as early as 1643. Its occurrence recently prompts suggestions for activities by professionals to prevent these tragedies. More research and further attention to this problem is warranted.

DURING A 14-MONTH PERIOD in 1987 and 1988, seven neonaticides occurring in Iowa were reported in the media. In five of the deaths of newborns, the reports mentioned that the pregnancy was unknown to the parents of the infant's mother or her friends, suggesting an intent by the women to conceal the pregnancies. The final element of secrecy was the mother's behavior which led to the death of the neonate and a subsequent effort to hide or dispose of the infant.

Historical Overview

Historically, the interests of newborns have been balanced against the needs of others and, as necessary, societies have accommodated infanticide when it was done for socially acceptable reasons. Notable among these reasons have been the financial costs to society of an unwanted infant (1). For example, in some primitive societies females, as potential childbearers, were perceived as a greater threat to the community's food resources than male infants, who would become hunters. Consequently, female infanticide was selectively practiced. Infanticide has often been seen as an act of caring or regard for the older children in the family, since it prevents a drain on resources necessary to sustain the others. In migratory societies, for example, women were usually able to care for only one infant at a time; in multiple births, infanticide was necessary to maintain the balance of care between mother and child.

Societal justification of infanticide has also focused on the infant's physical survivability. Historically, defective newborns have often been killed (2). In many cultures the defective newborn was not assumed to be human. Recent justifications for infanticide of defective newborns have been focused on their potential "quality of life" (3,4).

A third explanation of infanticide is sociocultural. In primitive societies, newborns were sometimes put to death in sacrificial rites (5). In cultures with a ranked caste social order, selective infanticide was used to protect the purity of genealogical lines (1). Infants of couples of unequal social rank were killed, thus insuring the purity of the higher castes. Finally, in some primitive societies with strong prohibitions against premarital sex and infidelity, the mothers of illegitimate children were ostracized, a situation that sometimes resulted in the murder of these infants by the mothers (6). This factor of ostracism may account for the majority of cases reported in this article.

In the history of the United States, the killing of illegitimate newborns was thought to be so common in the 1600s that a law was enacted making the concealment of a murdered illegitimate child a capital offense. A 1643 Massachusetts law that duplicated an English statute entitled "An act to prevent the destroying and murdering of bastard children" read, in part (7):

If any woman be delivered of a male or female, born alive, should by law be a bastard

. . . and either by drowning or secret burying to conceal the death . . . In every case the woman shall suffer death.

The same statute was enacted in the Provinces of Canada beginning in 1758. Legal records from this period reveal that the vast majority of women who were charged with this crime were unmarried (8). The disgrace which attached to unwed pregnancy in Victorian times was intense, and it often resulted in family and friends cutting off all relations with the unwed mother. Unless a woman could find a charitable organization to support her and her infant, prostitution was, typically, her only resource. As a result, many desperate pregnant women felt compelled to conceal their pregnancies, murder their newborns, and dispose of the body before their lives were disastrously transformed.

As society and laws changed, there has been a re-examination of homicide-infanticide statutes. Canadian legislators, for example, are now considering the abolishment of the infanticide statute. A proposed law would reduce the charge of murder to manslaughter if a woman kills her newly born child while suffering the effects of childbirth (9).

Incidence of Neonaticide

Resnick identified two distinct types of infanticide: "neonaticide" is the killing of a neonate on the day of its birth, and "filicide" is the murder of a son or a daughter older than 24 hours (10). These definitions are not standardized in the reporting of data about infanticides; typically, the data include both neonaticides and filicides.

Although the overall death rates of children younger than 15 years have decreased dramatically during the past 30 years, homicide rates in this age group have significantly increased. Child homicide rates for the United States are currently among the highest in the world. In a large metropolitan

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county, homicide rates for children more than tripled between 1958 and 1982. During this period, 235 children—neonates to 14 years old—were killed. Homicide rates for victims younger than 5 years were the highest, with women committing most of these murders. Almost 72 percent of these infants and toddlers were killed by relatives (11). These findings are particularly striking in view of the underrecording of infant homicides in the United States after 1968 because of changes in the International Classification of Diseases and the revision of the standard certificate of death (12).

Heiger reported that the incidence of filicide in the United States from 1968 to 1975 was fairly constant, averaging 3.2 percent per year of all homicides (13). However, the rate at which parents have been killing their children has been increasing, despite a drop in overall U.S. homicide rates from 1980 to 1983. During this period, the rate of filicide (including neonaticides) has risen between 0.2 percent to 0.4 percent per year. Almost 600 filicides were reported in the United States in 1983, compared with fewer than 500 in 1980. Sons are victims 1.3 times more often than daughters.

In Iowa, in 1986, in the year prior to the infanticides reported in this article, there was only one reported homicide of a child under 1 year of age (14).

Dynamics of Neonaticide

In Resnick's review of 34 neonaticides, he found that the mothers were significantly younger than mothers in a filicide group; were not likely to be married; and were less likely than the filicide mothers to be psychotic, depressed, or suicidal (10). The apparent motive in 83 percent of the neonaticides was that the child was unwanted; the stigma of an illegitimate child was identified as the "primary reason" for neonaticide by unmarried women. Resnick noted that a prominent feature in several neonaticides was the inability of the unwed girl to reveal her pregnancy to her mother because

of the girl's shame or fears of punishment and rejection. Brozovsky and Falit draw a similar conclusion in discussing two neonaticides (15). Both perpetrators—one 14, the other 15—feared abandonment by their mothers. This fear was heightened when they became pregnant, and the girls dealt with their condition by massive denial. When they were no longer able to deny the reality with the birth of the child, they became acutely disorganized and murdered their infants.

Gummersbach suggested that passivity is the single personality factor that most clearly separates women who commit neonaticide from those who seek abortions (16). Women who commit neonaticide often deny that they are pregnant; no preparation is made either for the birth or killing of the infant. Instead, when the reality is thrust upon them, they respond by murdering the child or fail to act to prevent its death. Hirshmann and Schmitz found that women who killed their illegitimate children were usually young, immature primiparas who submitted to sexual relations rather than initiate them, had no previous criminal records, and rarely attempted abortion (17).

d'Orban found that all neonaticides he studied involved attempts to conceal the infant's body after death, for example, in cupboards, dustbins, or rubbish dumps (18). Contrary to expectation, he stated, most mothers killed their children by an aggressive act (drowning, suffocation, or battering) rather than by passive neglect or abandonment. Often the drownings followed birth into toilet bowls. Examining these cases, Miller and Davis found that term mothers who bore into commodes had a strong tendency to deny knowledge of pregnancy or to engage in attempts at concealment of the conceptus (19).

Seven case reports, whose profiles and manner of behavior are strikingly consistent with the studies cited previously, follow. All occurred within a 200-mile radius of Des Moines, Iowa's capital city, between February 1987 and April 1988.

Case Reports

Case 1. February 1987. A 19-year-old college freshman drowned her 9-pound boy in a college dormitory toilet. She subsequently put the infant in a trash can; he was discovered by a housekeeper several hours later. The woman's roommate and other college friends reported not knowing that the woman was pregnant (20). She subsequently pleaded guilty to a charge of child endangerment and was sentenced to 10 years in prison (21).

Case 2. February 1987. Less than 2 weeks after the discovery of case 1, a 14-year-old gave birth to a 5-pound girl. An autopsy disclosed that the baby was carried to full term and was alive and healthy at birth. The infant was found in its mother's closet in a trash bag 3 days after birth by the 14-year-old's mother. The infant had died from exposure. A police spokesman said the girl's parents told officers that they were not aware that their daughter was pregnant (22). The girl subsequently pleaded guilty to a child endangerment charge in juvenile court. Sentencing information was withheld (23).

Case 3. March 1987. A 4 1/2-pound baby girl was found in a ditch by highway workers. The infant, born alive, had died of exposure (24). A 17-year-old was subsequently charged in juvenile court with the death of the infant. The girl's stepmother said that her stepdaughter was afraid to tell her family of the pregnancy. She said she believed the girl went into labor earlier than she expected and then had the baby while at home alone. Sentencing information was withheld (25).

Case 4. June 1987. A 28-year-old primipara told investigators she did not know that she was pregnant after her newborn was found dead in a toilet. The 6-pound boy drowned after delivery into the toilet (26). The woman was subsequently sentenced to 20 years in prison for child endangerment and neglect (27).

Cases 5 and 6. June 1987. A 19-year-old was charged with improperly disposing of her baby's body after discarding the body in the garbage. In a similar case, the State medical examiner examined the body of a newborn set on fire by the infant's 18-year-old uncle. He was charged after setting on fire the baby of his 19-year-old sister at their parents' home (28).

Case 7. April 1988. A 28-year-old who had hidden her pregnancy from her parents and neighbors was found dead from blood loss after giving birth in the family's bathroom. The 5-pound male infant died from exposure (29).

Discussion

In five of the seven cases of neonaticide reported in Iowa between February 1987 and April 1988, the teenage mother had either concealed the pregnancy or attempted to conceal the dead infant. In the

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other two cases, the mothers were 28 years old. Both had also concealed the pregnancy; one woman (case 4) denied knowing that she was pregnant. In five cases, the manner of death was drowning or exposure; in cases 5 and 6, cause of death was unknown. In no case report was there an indication that the mothers were mentally ill.

Since these cases occurred in a relatively brief period and in close proximity, the possibility exists that news coverage of the initial case may have had some influence on subsequent events. The "copy cat" phenomenon is often hypothesized to account for clustering of suicides in communities and in other crimes which receive media attention (for example, assassination attempts and serial murders).

With the exception of the woman who died in childbirth, charges related to the death or disposal of the infant were brought in each case. The 28-year-old woman was sentenced to 20 years in prison and a 19-year-old woman to 10 years after their babies drowned in toilets. The sentencing outcome of the juveniles was unknown; however, news reports carried judicial references to the need "for counseling" in these cases.

Conclusion

The media reports of these cases generated considerable discussion among health and social service professionals across the State. The deaths of the infants were attributed to the mothers' inability to acknowledge their pregnancies and to seek help for themselves and their infants. Calls were made for "more sex education," "better communication within families," and "more outreach by pregnancy service-providers" to prevent future neonaticides. The third suggestion is especially strong,

given the potential for "copy cat" acts in these situations. Without a massive educational response to the first case by public health and social service professionals, desperate young women may not know that alternatives to neonaticide exist in their communities. Instead, they may follow the lead of someone they have read or heard about.

Resnick's call for liberalization of abortion laws to reduce the incidence of neonaticide was issued in 1970 (10) with no apparent effect on the incidence of neonaticide. It appears that, until the cultural stigma against an illegitimate child is modified, a number of women, particularly teenagers, will feel compelled not only to conceal their pregnancies, but also to conceal their infants by murdering them. Religious proscriptions against premarital sex may further militate against some unmarried women's admission of pregnancy; this conjecture was raised in cases 1 and 7.

Heiger speculated that professional public health and social service approaches are not meeting society's needs in preventing filicides and infanticides (13). Since much of the needed activities must focus on prevention by health and mental health professionals, the phenomenon of neonaticide warrants further attention and more research by health and social service professionals.

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