Journal of Population Therapeutics & Clinical Pharmacology

RESEARCH ARTICLE
DOI: 10.53555/smh61q57

AN EPIDEMIOLOGICAL STUDY OF FORENSIC PATHOLOGY IN A TERTIARY CARE HOSPITAL IN NORTH INDIA: A STUDY OF AUTOPSY TRENDS.

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Abstract

Introduction: In India, the role of forensic pathology is particularly crucial due to the country's diverse population, where socio-economic factors, cultural practices, and access to healthcare services vary widely. The Indian population faces a unique set of challenges in the field of forensic pathology, including delayed medical interventions, limited access to quality healthcare, and an increasing burden of both communicable and non-communicable diseases.

Material & Methods: The present study is a retrospective analysis of autopsy cases conducted at a tertiary care hospital. The data for this study was collected from the following sources: Inquest Report (Form 146(i) & (ii)), Autopsy Register**,** Post-Mortem Reports and Information from Relatives of the Deceased**.** The collected data was categorized and analyzed based on Manner of Death, Gender Distribution, Age Distribution and Cause of Death. The collected data was entered into a structured format and analysed using SPSS version-21.

Results: The total number of cases is 635, with a higher frequency of cases observed among males (501) compared to females (134). The largest group is in the 21-30 age range, accounting for 22.2% of cases, followed closely by 31-40 at 22.65%. Road Traffic Accidents (RTAs) lead the list, accounting for 29.92% of the cases, followed by Hanging at 17% and Poisoning at 14.96%. Other significant causes include Natural Death (15.11%), Drowning (7.08%), and Fall from Height (5.03%). Causes like Assault, Railway Accidents, Burns, and Electrocution contribute smaller percentages, with Snake/Animal Bites being the least common cause at 1.41%.

Conclusion: By examining demographic factors and trends, this research underscores the importance of autopsies in improving public health surveillance, guiding preventive measures, and enhancing medico-legal investigations.

Keywords: Epidemiological study, Forensic pathology, Autopsy trends

INTRODUCTION

Forensic pathology plays a pivotal role in medico-legal investigations by determining the cause and manner of death, which can have significant implications for both public health and criminal justice. The field is essential not only for providing answers to families and the community but also for legal purposes, such as criminal investigations and civil litigation. In India, forensic pathology has gained increasing importance as it bridges the gap between medicine and law, especially in the context of autopsies. Autopsy trends offer valuable insights into the causes of death, patterns of disease, and the effectiveness of healthcare systems.

Globally, forensic pathology has been vital in advancing knowledge regarding public health issues. For example, in Western countries, autopsy data have been used to study the prevalence of diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancers, and infectious diseases, which can vary by region and population group. Studies have shown that autopsy findings can reveal discrepancies between clinical diagnoses and actual causes of death, underscoring the importance of postmortem examinations in ensuring accurate death certifications.[1]

In India, the role of forensic pathology is particularly crucial due to the country's diverse population, where socio-economic factors, cultural practices, and access to healthcare services vary widely. The Indian population faces a unique set of challenges in the field of forensic pathology, including delayed medical interventions, limited access to quality healthcare, and an increasing burden of both communicable and non-communicable diseases. As India continues to modernize and urbanize, the role of forensic pathology in understanding mortality trends becomes increasingly important.

Autopsy trends in India reflect various factors, including the geographical location, socio-economic conditions, and healthcare access. A study by Tiwari et al. in 2021[2] found that most autopsies in India are conducted in cases of unnatural deaths. Homicidal deaths, accidents, and suicides contribute significantly to autopsy cases in urban centers, while rural areas show a higher incidence of deaths due to diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, and nutritional deficiencies. These findings indicate the prevalence of both communicable and non-communicable diseases in the Indian population, with the former still contributing to a significant number of deaths, particularly in rural areas.

In contrast to developed countries, where autopsy rates are generally lower due to advanced diagnostic technologies, India still faces a high demand for postmortem examinations due to the lack of robust healthcare infrastructure in many regions. A study by Sharma et al. in 2017 [3] noted that in India, forensic autopsies are often performed in both medico-legal cases and hospital deaths, which is not always the case in Western countries where autopsies are more frequently restricted to medico-legal investigations.

Epidemiological studies of autopsy trends have profound implications for public health. By systematically reviewing autopsy reports, researchers can identify the leading causes of death in a given population. Such studies help in understanding the burden of diseases and injuries, both communicable and non-communicable, and provide valuable information for healthcare planning. [4] For instance, identifying trauma-related deaths in a particular area could lead to improved road safety measures or more effective intervention programs for preventing violence. Similarly, the identification of infectious disease-related deaths can highlight gaps in vaccination programs or health interventions.

In India, the increasing prevalence of lifestyle-related diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and cancers has shifted the focus of forensic pathology from primarily trauma-related deaths to deaths from chronic conditions. Autopsies provide critical insights into the role of these conditions, which may not always be clinically evident in life, especially in the absence of regular health check-ups.[5] The rise in these deaths has led to greater emphasis on forensic pathology to identify and confirm disease burdens.

The aim of this study is to examine the epidemiological trends of autopsy cases conducted in a tertiary care hospital in North India, with a focus on understanding the patterns of mortality, causes

of death, and the role of forensic pathology in medico-legal investigations with the following objectives:

1. To identify and categorize the causes of death in autopsy cases, distinguishing between natural, accidental, suicidal, and homicidal deaths.
2. To analyze the demographic characteristics (age, sex, and socio-economic status) of individuals undergoing autopsy in the hospital, and their correlation with the causes of death.
3. To evaluate the role of forensic autopsy in resolving discrepancies between clinical diagnoses and actual causes of death, focusing on its contribution to medico-legal investigations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is a retrospective analysis of autopsy cases conducted at a tertiary care hospital in North India over a period of one year, from July 2023 to June 2024**.**

➢ **Data Collection:** The data for this study was collected from the following sources:

1. **Inquest Report (Form 146(i) & (ii))**:

a. Inquest reports are legal documents filled by law enforcement officers when a suspicious or unnatural death occurs. Form 146(i) and Form 146(ii) are used to document the cause and circumstances of death.

b. These forms provided preliminary details about the deceased, including demographic information, manner of death, and initial observations made by the police or investigators.

2. **Autopsy Register**:

The autopsy register maintained by the hospital's forensic pathology department was reviewed to collect essential data on each case. This register records information such as the date of autopsy, identification of the deceased, and whether the autopsy was conducted in the presence of the family or under medico-legal circumstances.

3. **Post-Mortem Reports**:

Detailed post-mortem reports were used as primary sources of information to determine the cause and manner of death.

These reports include findings from the autopsy procedure, such as external and internal examination results, toxicology reports, histopathological findings, and final cause of death as determined by the forensic pathologist.

4. **Information from Relatives of the Deceased**:

In cases where the autopsy reports were incomplete or additional context was needed, interviews with the relatives of the deceased were conducted. These provided supplementary information about the circumstances leading to death, medical history, and potential contributing factors not captured in the official records.

➢ **Inclusion Criteria**

- All cases in which an autopsy was performed at the Government District Hospital
- Both **medico-legal autopsies** (including deaths under suspicious circumstances such as accidents, suicides, and homicides) and **clinical autopsies** (performed in cases of natural deaths where the cause of death is uncertain) were included.

➢ **Exclusion Criteria**

- Cases where autopsy records were incomplete or lost.
- Cases in which consent for autopsy was not obtained, and no official documentation was available.

➢ **Data Variables:**

- The collected data was categorized and analyzed based on the following variables:

1. **Manner of Death**:

- This was classified into the following categories based on the autopsy findings and police investigation:
  - **Natural Death**: Death due to natural causes like diseases or medical conditions.
  - **Accidental Death**: Death due to external factors such as road traffic accidents, falls, drowning, etc.
  - **Suicidal Death**: Death resulting from self-inflicted injuries or poisoning.
  - **Homicidal Death**: Death caused by intentional injury or violence inflicted by another person.
  - **Undetermined/Unknown**: Cases where the manner of death could not be conclusively determined from the available evidence.

2. **Gender Distribution**:
   - The study analyzed the gender distribution of the autopsy cases, classified as male or female, to identify any patterns in the mortality data.
3. **Age Distribution**:
   - Data on the age of the deceased was recorded and grouped into age categories

4. **Cause of Death**:
   - The primary causes of death were categorized as: Burns, Assault, Road Traffic Accident, Poisoning, Hanging, Natural death, Railway accident, Fall from height, Drowning, Snake bite/Animal bite, Electrocution

➢ **Statistical Analysis:**

- The collected data was entered into a structured format using **SPSS** version-21 for analysis. Each case was coded with unique identifiers to maintain confidentiality and ensure accuracy.
- Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, including the calculation of frequencies, percentages, and means.
- Statistical tests (such as chi-square tests) were applied to determine if there were any significant associations between categorical variables (e.g., gender and cause of death).

➢ **Ethical Considerations**

- Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Ethical Review Board.
- **Informed consent** was obtained from the relatives of the deceased before conducting interviews, and confidentiality of all patient-related information was maintained throughout the study.
- The study adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure that the data collection process did not interfere with the medico-legal investigations.

RESULTS:

In this study, majority of cases were Male with 501 autopsies which constitute 78.8% and 134 autopsies were conducted on females attributing to 21.2% of total cases

Fig.1: Distribution of cases based on Gender

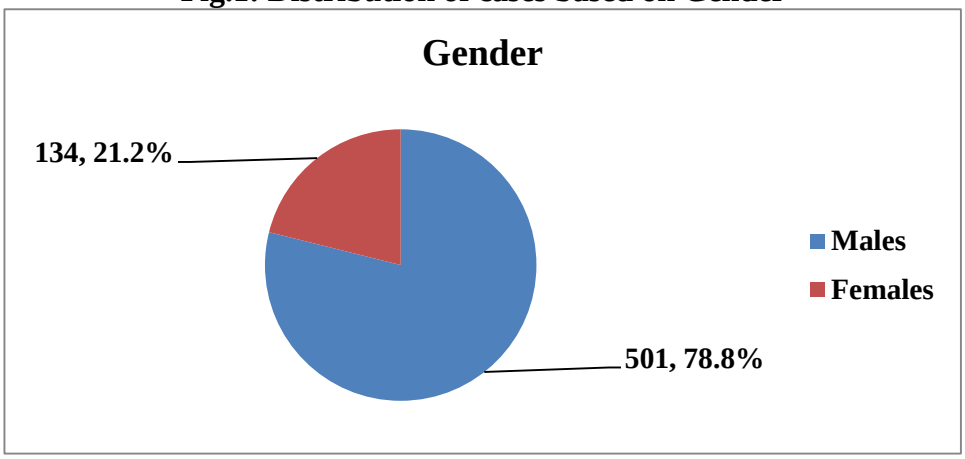

Table 1: Breakdown of Cases by Manner of Death

Manner of Death	Frequency
Accidental	269
Suicidal	213
Homicidal	27
Undetermined/Unknown	126

❖ **Accidental Deaths (269 cases)**:
- The most frequent manner of death, highlighting the various risks individuals face in daily life.
- Traffic accidents, falls, and accidental poisonings are major contributors to this category.

❖ **Suicidal Deaths (213 cases)**:
- Suicide is the second most common cause, pointing to the critical importance of addressing mental health issues.
- Suicidal deaths highlight the need for effective mental health support, crisis intervention, and public health strategies.

❖ **Homicidal Deaths (27 cases)**:
- While the least frequent, homicide is still a tragic and significant cause of death.
- These deaths often prompt criminal investigations and are associated with issues like violence, crime, and social tensions.

❖ **Undetermined/Unknown(126 cases):**
- Cases where the manner of death could not be conclusively determined from the available evidence.

Table 2: Case Distribution According to Age Group

Age Group (years)	Males	Females	Total	Percentage
0-10	7	5	12	1.89%
11-20	33	12	45	7.09%
21-30	101	40	141	22.2%
31-40	116	28	144	22.65%
41-50	105	13	118	18.5%
51-60	73	15	88	13.85%
61-70	52	16	68	10.71%
71-80	13	4	17	2.67%
81-90	1	1	2	0.31%
Total	501	134	635	100%

This table shows the distribution of cases across different age groups, broken down by gender. The total number of cases is 635, with a higher frequency of cases observed among males (501) compared to females (134). The largest group is in the **21-30** age range, accounting for 22.2% of cases, followed closely by **31-40** at 22.65%.

The **0-10** age group has the fewest cases, comprising only 1.89% of the total. Generally, the highest frequencies of cases occur in the younger adult age groups, with a gradual decrease in older age ranges. The table highlights a notable gender disparity, with males being significantly more represented across all age groups.

Table 3: Breakdown of Cases by Cause of Death

Particulars	No. of Cases	Percentage
Burns	4	0.62%
Assault	24	3.77%
Road Traffic Accident	190	29.92%
Poisoning	95	14.96%
Hanging	108	17.0%
Natural death	96	15.11%
Railway accident	22	3.46%
Fall from height	32	5.03%
Drowning	45	7.08%
Snake bite/Animal bite	9	1.41%
Electrocution	10	1.57%

This table presents the distribution of cases based on their specific causes of death. **Road Traffic Accidents (RTAs)** lead the list, accounting for 29.92% of the cases, followed by **Hanging** at 17% and **Poisoning** at 14.96%. Other significant causes include **Natural Death** (15.11%), **Drowning** (7.08%), and **Fall from Height** (5.03%). Causes like **Assault**, **Railway Accidents**, **Burns**, and **Electrocution** contribute smaller percentages, with **Snake/Animal Bites** being the least common cause at 1.41%. The table highlights the major role of accidents, particularly road traffic accidents, in causing fatalities, along with a notable number of deaths attributed to suicide and poisoning.

In table 4 shows the gender-based breakdown of causes of death, illustrating distinct patterns for males and females. **Road Traffic Accidents (RTAs)** are the leading cause of death for both genders, with a significantly higher number of male fatalities (147) compared to females (43). **Hanging** and **Poisoning** are also more prevalent among males, with 79 and 64 male deaths, respectively, compared to 29 and 31 for females. However, **Burns** and **Fall from Height** show a higher frequency among females, with 3 female deaths from burns compared to 1 male, and 5 female deaths from falls compared to 27 male deaths. The table highlights gender differences in the causes of death, with males experiencing higher mortality in most categories, particularly in accidents and violent causes.

Table 4: Gender-Based Distribution of Cause of Death

Particulars	Males	Females
Burns	1	3
Assault	16	8
Road Traffic Accident	147	43
Poisoning	64	31
Hanging	79	29
Natural death	62	34
Railway accident	18	4
Fall from height	27	5
Drowning	33	12
Snake bite/Animal bite	5	4
Electrocution	9	1

DISCUSSION

Demographic Characteristics and Mortality Trends

One of the primary objectives of this study was to explore the demographic patterns of mortality in autopsy cases. As with previous studies, this research found that the majority of autopsy cases

involved young to middle-aged adults, with a higher incidence in males. Similar findings have been reported in other studies in India, such as those by Tiwari et al. in 2021 [6] who observed a predominance of male autopsy cases, with a high percentage of deaths occurring in individuals aged 20 to 50 years. This pattern is consistent with the higher rates of road traffic accidents, violence, and trauma-related deaths observed in this age group. The male predominance in autopsy cases can also be attributed to factors such as lifestyle choices, high-risk occupations, and increased exposure to traumatic events as seen in study done by Sharma et al. in 2017.[7]

Age-wise distribution showed that autopsy cases in younger individuals were primarily related to accidental deaths, while in older populations, natural causes such as cardiovascular diseases and strokes were more common. This aligns with global patterns of mortality, where cardiovascular diseases and strokes are significant causes of death in the elderly population. The findings also echo those from Western countries, where the elderly population is particularly vulnerable to chronic diseases as in study done by Barton et al. in 2016. [8] The presence of chronic diseases in autopsy cases in India underscores the growing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the country, which is a shift from the traditionally higher rates of infectious diseases and maternal mortality.

Causes of Death: Natural vs. Unnatural Deaths

The study found that unnatural deaths, including those caused by trauma (e.g., road traffic accidents, suicides, homicides) and poisoning, constituted a significant proportion of autopsy cases. This finding is consistent with a study by Sen et al. in 2019 [9] which highlighted that trauma-related deaths accounted for a large share of autopsies in a North Indian tertiary hospital. Accidents, especially road traffic accidents, were among the leading causes of unnatural death. A similar pattern is observed across India, where road traffic accidents have emerged as a major public health concern, with the World Health Organization reporting India as one of the countries with the highest number of traffic-related fatalities (WHO, 2020).[10] The high rates of trauma-related deaths in young adults reflect inadequate road safety measures, over-speeding, and the lack of proper enforcement of traffic regulations.

Suicides were another significant cause of unnatural death in this study. Suicide rates have been rising in India, with studies indicating a higher incidence among the youth, particularly in urban areas. The reasons behind this increase are multifaceted, including mental health issues, family conflicts, and socio-economic pressures as seen in study done by Singhal et al. in 2018.[11]Mental health issues, although increasingly acknowledged, remain stigmatized in many parts of India, which contributes to delayed intervention and underreporting. This emphasizes the need for better mental health support services and greater public awareness about the importance of mental well-being.

Homicides also contributed to the percentage of unnatural deaths, though to a lesser extent than accidents and suicides. This finding is consistent with reports of rising violent crime rates in certain parts of India. However, the relatively low incidence of homicides in this study could be attributed to regional differences in crime rates or the selective nature of autopsy cases, where homicides are often investigated only when there is significant evidence of foul play (Sharma et al., 2017) [7]

On the other hand, natural deaths, including those from cardiovascular diseases, respiratory illnesses, and infections, were also common among autopsy cases. This trend reflects the ongoing burden of infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis and pneumonia, particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas of India, where healthcare access remains limited. The presence of these conditions in autopsy reports points to gaps in public health interventions, such as vaccination, early disease detection, and effective treatment.

Comparison with Global Trends

While the findings of this study reflect common patterns of mortality observed in many developing countries, there are some notable differences when compared to high-income countries. In countries

like the United States and the United Kingdom, the rate of autopsies has declined over the years due to advancements in medical technology and diagnostic tools, which have reduced the need for postmortem examinations.[1] In contrast, autopsies continue to be an essential tool in India due to the high incidence of unresolved or suspicious deaths. The prevalence of trauma-related deaths in India is higher than in many Western countries, where deaths from chronic diseases dominate.
However, like other countries, India is experiencing a demographic shift towards an aging population, which is likely to lead to an increase in deaths from non-communicable diseases. The growing burden of diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and cancer demands better surveillance systems and healthcare interventions to manage these conditions effectively.

Challenges in Forensic Pathology in India

Despite the important role that forensic pathology plays in investigating deaths and informing public health policies, the practice faces several challenges in India. These include inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained forensic pathologists, and inconsistent reporting standards. Many hospitals, especially in rural areas, lack the necessary resources and expertise to conduct thorough postmortem examinations, which could result in underreporting of certain causes of death or misclassification. Studies have shown that inconsistent autopsy practices can lead to discrepancies in the reported causes of death similar to findings of Tiwari et al in 2021.[6]

Moreover, cultural and legal factors also play a role in the underutilization of autopsy services. In some cases, families may refuse autopsies due to religious beliefs, leading to a lack of data on certain deaths. Additionally, in some regions, medico-legal autopsies may be delayed due to bureaucratic hurdles or insufficient resources, which can hinder timely investigations.[5]

Recommendations

1. **Improved Data Recording and Reporting**: It is crucial to standardize the recording and reporting of autopsy data. This will help in creating a robust database for future epidemiological studies, improving accuracy in death cause classification, and enabling better analysis of trends over time. Automated systems for data entry and analysis should be introduced to reduce human error and improve accessibility of records.
2. **Public Awareness and Training Programs**: Raising public awareness about the importance of autopsies in cases of unnatural deaths is necessary. Additionally, training healthcare providers, law enforcement officials, and other stakeholders in the medico-legal significance of autopsies can promote better utilization of forensic pathology services, ensuring accurate death certification and more reliable public health data.
3. **Enhanced Surveillance of Road Traffic Accidents and Violent Deaths**: Given the high incidence of trauma-related deaths, especially from road traffic accidents and violence, there is a need for focused surveillance and intervention programs. Autopsy data should be used to inform policies aimed at improving road safety, reducing accidents, and addressing social violence.
4. **Increased Use of Forensic Pathology in Rural Areas**: Given the discrepancy between urban and rural healthcare access, efforts should be made to expand forensic pathology services to rural areas, ensuring that all deaths, particularly unnatural ones, are investigated thoroughly. This will provide a more comprehensive picture of mortality trends across the entire population.
5. **Integration of Autopsy Findings in Medical Education**: Incorporating the findings and significance of forensic autopsies into medical curricula can help future healthcare professionals understand the critical role of forensic pathology in diagnosing and preventing diseases. This knowledge could enhance their ability to manage cases involving suspicious deaths and contribute to more accurate clinical diagnoses.

Limitations

1. **Retrospective Study Design**: This study is retrospective in nature, relying on existing autopsy records. This may result in incomplete or inconsistent data, as some records may lack key information, affecting the accuracy of the analysis.
2. **Geographical Limitation**: The study is conducted in a single tertiary care hospital in North India, which may not fully represent the trends across other regions of India. Variations in healthcare infrastructure, socio-economic conditions, and demographic factors may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population.
3. **Underreporting and Misclassification**: There may be cases where deaths, particularly those involving natural causes or mild trauma, are not subjected to autopsy due to clinical assumptions, resulting in underreporting of certain types of deaths. Misclassification of cause of death in the autopsy reports can also influence the study's outcomes.
4. **Limited Scope of Medical Data**: While autopsy findings provide valuable information, the study is based solely on postmortem examinations and may not take into account the complete clinical history, including pre-existing conditions, treatment interventions, and patient management, which could influence the cause of death.
5. **Ethical and Legal Constraints**: In some cases, the availability of autopsy data may be limited due to ethical or legal constraints, particularly in cases where family consent for postmortem examinations is not obtained. This may lead to incomplete representation of all deaths in the hospital.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this epidemiological study of autopsy trends in a tertiary care hospital in North India highlights the significant role of forensic pathology in understanding mortality patterns and causes of death. The study provides valuable insights into the prevalence of both natural and unnatural deaths, including trauma, infections, and lifestyle diseases. By examining demographic factors and trends, this research underscores the importance of autopsies in improving public health surveillance, guiding preventive measures, and enhancing medico-legal investigations. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of health challenges in North India, helping inform healthcare policies and safety interventions.

Funding: None
Conflict of Interest: No

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