

# Autopsy Findings against Media Reports: An Emerging Paradox in Developing Countries

Ossei Paul Poku Sampene<sup>1</sup> and Agyeman-Duah Eric<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Pathology, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana

<sup>2</sup>Department of Biochemistry and Biotechnology, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana

## Abstract

Africans, especially Ghanaians, do rely on media reportage than autopsy or police findings in alleged murder or homicide cases. An autopsy finding has numerous benefits of which finding the actual cause of death is paramount. However, most findings are met with public displeasure especially when it is not in line with media reports made earlier. The study review such incidence of which the deceased was reported to have been beaten and dragged on the street which resulted in his demise. Some media reports claimed that the deceased sustained multiple Taser bodily burns and other injuries which include rib fractures, head injury and bodily lacerations at time of reportage. The autopsy findings were polar to the media report. The immediate cause of death was congestive heart failure which was triggered by asymptomatic chronic massive congestion and enlargement of the liver, lungs and the spleen (mechanism of death). The inveterate nature of these condition rules out all suspected foul play or assault. The absence of external or internal marks of violence further validate that the death was natural and not homicide.

**Keywords:** Autopsy; Media report; Injuries; Congestive heart failure; Chronic; Natural; Homicide

## Introduction

The global media has over the years provided impeccable up-to-date reportage on the various events happening around the globe [1]. The media has been commended by many institutions for their outstanding efforts to keep the world updated in the field of sports, education and science, climatic changes, technological advancement and other forms of human activities happening around the globe [2].

Since the provision of freedom of expression after World War II, specifically to the press, the media has exercised this freedom both positively and negatively [3,4]. Criticisms and some reportage has been beneficial to mould societies and countries at large. Such situations are seen in Slovenia and Vietnam where political discrepancies were corrected with the help of journalism [5,6]. There are some instances where media reportage has also created tension or riot in a country. The 2009 G20 Summit Protest in London is an example. It is believed that the media reports conflicted with the actual events which ended up creating tension between the citizens and Police. Emphasis has been made on the effective reportage in technologically empowered era, confirmation of reportage by professionals, and extent of communicating delicate information to the public [7].

A major challenge is the compliance of media to WHO media guidelines, especially in some developing countries. Fu et al. in their study assessed the compliance of Hong Kong media to these regulations [8]. It was shown that most of these media institutions failed to comply with these regulations and to some extent, provide information which are contrary to actual events, misleading the general public.

Africans, especially Ghanaians, do rely on media reportage than autopsy or police findings in alleged murder or homicide cases [9]. Autopsy findings has numerous benefits of which finding the actual cause of death is inclusive. However, most findings are met with public displeasure especially when it is not in line with media reports made earlier [10,11]. This has been a paradox in the minds of Ghanaians, sometimes resulting in conflicts [12,13].

The study critically reviews and analyses such incidence in Ghana.

## Case Study

The deceased was alleged to have been beaten by policemen. The deceased was reported to have been beaten and dragged on the street which resulted in his demise. Some media reports claimed that the deceased sustained multiple taser bodily burns and other injuries which include rib fractures, head injury and bodily lacerations at time of reportage [11,14,15]. The body was deposited at the morgue for an autopsy examination.

## Autopsy proceedings

Body was identified to the team of pathologists by 3 relations of deceased which include a maternal uncle in the presence of the police drawn from the homicide unit of the police headquarters from Accra and Kumasi.

## Autopsy findings

**External examination:** The body is of a male of normal posture, looks averagely-built and moderately-nourished. The eyes were fixed and normal. The oral mucosa shows signs of cyanosis. There was rigor mortis in small and large joints. The postmortem hypostasis is symmetrical and localized to the back of the body and the limbs. There is no sign of early decomposition. There was no palpable mass in the genitals.

**Marks of violence:** The body had no marks suggestive of any form of brutalities such as assault, taser, head injury and lacerations/abrasions (Figure 1).

**\*Corresponding author:** Department of Biochemistry and Biotechnology/Department of Pathology, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, School of Medical Sciences, Ghana, Tel: 233269684807; E-mail: [saxcess21@gmail.com](mailto:saxcess21@gmail.com)

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Figure 1: External examination of the body during autopsy.

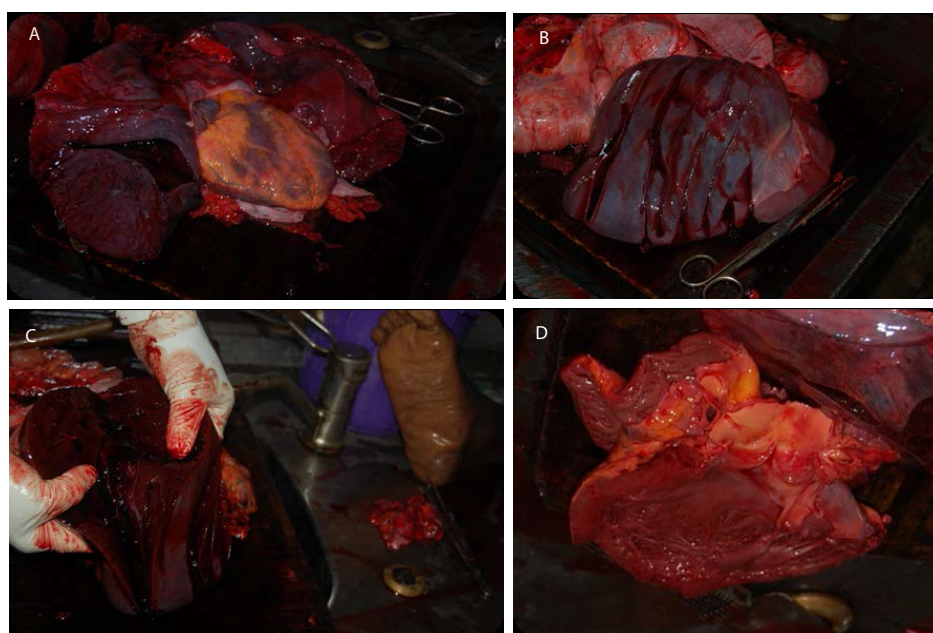


Figure 2: Examination of internal organs showing (a) Congested Liver with heart, (b) Slate-grey congested spleen, (c) Congested Lungs and (d) Heart with ventricular dilatation.

### Internal examination:

- a. **Hepatobiliary system:** The liver weighed 1800 g (evidence of hepatomegaly). It was massively congested. The gall bladder had normal size and wall thickness. There were no stones. The biliary tract was patent and bile could be expressed from the ampulla prior to dissection. The hepatic and portal veins were normal (Figure 2a).
- b. **Lymphorecticular system:** The spleen weighed 350 g and had a smooth surface. The capsular surface was slate-gray in discolouration (Figure 2b).
- c. **Respiratory system:** The right and left lungs weighed 750 g and 800 g, respectively and showed massive congestion. The

pulmonary vessels had smooth inner wall surface and there was no thrombus in the arterial lumen (Figure 2c).

- d. **Cardiovascular system:** The heart weighed 750 g and it was globular in shape. The atria and the auricular appendages were free of thrombus. The left ventricular wall was 0.8 cm and right ventricle was 0.2 cm (Figure 2d).
- e. **Genitourinary system:** The right and left kidneys weighed 140 g and 150 g, respectively. They had granular subcapsular surfaces. Cut surface showed normal cortico-medullary distinction. The renal pelvis and calyces were normal. The ureters and bladder had normal mucosa. There was no dilatation, ulcer or tumor.
- f. **Other system:** The musculoskeletal, central nervous and

gastrointestinal systems were found to have no pathological findings.

### Summary of post-mortem findings

1. Marked peripheral cyanosis
2. Dilated, enlarged and thinned heart walls
3. Congested, enlarged liver, spleen and lungs

### Conclusion

The cause of death was:

1. Congestive heart failure
  - a. Biventricular cardiac dilatation
  - b. Massive hepatosplenomegaly
2. Natural

### Discussion

Pathology in Ghana is still at its toddler stage with less than 15 trained specialist undertaking the same duties projected to be accrued out by at least 50 pathologist. Hence pathologist in Ghana must be commended for their efforts in meeting the demands in various hospitals [16].

Human beings are moved by what is seen, heard or felt. It therefore circumscribe the effect of the media on human demeanor. In as much as every media institution want to catch the attention of people, it is dawn on them to use the appropriate means to engage listeners, viewers or readers.

The benefits of media reportage can never be undermined as most of them help in shaping the culture and democracy in many countries. However, there are instances where controversial media reportage has stirred up chaos and conflicts in many societies and countries at large [5-7].

An area which needs urgent attention is media reportage of alleged assault incidence. This is gradually taking seats in Ghana, inciting chaos or riots. In 2014, a football referee was alleged to have been assaulted by some section of the crowd leading to his death after being admitted at the hospital for some time [17]. In 2016, the mysterious death of a renowned radio presenter incited a lot of rumours with some media reports linking it to political influence. Some also attributed it to some spiritual cause. Moreover, some even went extra mile of documenting autopsy findings in their reportage when no postmortem findings have been giving the pathologist [18].

Majority of Ghanaians rely on media for information and hence

attribute credibility and authenticity to every message conveyed by the media. It therefore becomes very difficult to change public perceptions on occasions where media reports are antipodal to actual events [9].

Autopsy is the prime procedure for revealing cause the cause of death for both clinical and medico-legal issues. Unlike clinical autopsies, medico-legal are needed to provide evidence to an alleged felony or homicide and hence the forensic pathologist is required to be very accurate in examination and findings to aid in legal proceedings [19].

### External examinations

Postmortem examination or autopsy always proceeds with external examinations which include body identification and finding the various skin changes. Skin changes usually investigated include wounds or injuries, scars, piercings and tattoos, which are usually peculiar to the manner of death (natural, assault, etc.). Wounds, injuries and scars are the major external features looked out for in unnatural death. In cases of suspected assault, some skin changes expected include blunt injuries, incised and penetration wounds. In this case study, the body of the deceased presented no marks of violence that suggested an assault or electrocution. This is antipodal to the various reports by some media claiming the deceased sustained multiple taser bodily burns and other injuries such as rib fractures, head injury and bodily lacerations at time of reportage. It is impossible for an assaulted person to show no marks of violence on any part of the body [19]. However, there was an incidence of peripheral cyanosis.

### Internal examination

There was no sign of internal bleeding or organ rupture, this further questions the alleged assault report by the media. Taylor asseverated that internal bleeding due to organ injuries or rupture and external wounds/injuries are prerequisite to affirm assault. Internal bleeding might have incited the influence of external factor on the organ injury. However, this was absent and therefore questions the excessive bleeding of deceased as reported by the media (Figure 3).

### Systemic findings

Sudden death are mostly caused cardiovascular diseases. These usually have underlying pathologies of organs such as lungs, liver, spleen and kidneys [20]. It is vivid that the deceased had an enlarged heart weighing 750 g. The average weight of a normal male is 300 to 350 g, about half of the heart weight of deceased. Dissection showed congestion with a dilated, enlarged and thinned myocardium. The left and right ventricle measured 0.8 and 0.2 cm respectively which is below the normal size of 1.3 to 1.5 cm for the left and 0.3 to 0.5 cm for the right ventricle. The pathology of the heart of the deceased is a chronic condition and thus cannot occur within a short period of assault [21,22].



**Figure 3:** Internal Examination of the body during post-mortem.



The lungs were massively congested weighing 750 and 800 g for right and left lungs, respectively. The lungs are for gaseous exchange and hence it is pathological when congested. Congested lungs can be caused by both trauma and left sided heart failure. The deceased also sustained massively congested hepatomegaly weighing 1800 g. Congestion of the liver is associated with preterminal cardiac failure in nontraumatic death. The spleen showed massive congestion and enlargement with discoloration, weighing 350 g (above normal, 150 g). Congestion of the spleen is linked with cardiac failure, cirrhosis and portal/splenic thrombosis [21]. There were normal findings in the other organ systems.

### Summary of findings

The deceased suffered from massive congestion of the liver, lungs and spleen together with biventricular dilatation of the heart wall. Persistent incidence of these conditions eventually led to congestive heart failure which was marked by peripheral cyanosis.

### Cause of death

Autopsy findings seeks to address the immediate cause, mechanism and manner of death. The immediate cause of death is the ultimate complication or pathology antecedent to death. The mechanism of death is the physiologic or biochemical frenzy that leads to the immediate cause of death. The manner of death describes how the mechanism of death was initiated. It denotes whether the death is natural or unnatural (accident, suicide or homicide) [20]. In this case study, the immediate cause of death was congestive heart failure. This final complication was triggered by asymptomatic chronic massive congestion and enlargement of the liver, lungs and the spleen (mechanism of death) [21,22]. The inveterate nature of these condition rules out all suspected foul play or assault. The absence of external or internal marks of violence further validate that the death was natural and not homicide.

### Conclusion

It is evident that deceased died via a natural cause. However, the biggest challenge is how to convince the public whose minds are already graffitied by the media to expect nothing but homicide. Not only does this cause chaos, it also put the life of pathologist(s) in danger and also questions the credibility of forensic practices in Ghana. The media should, in the best interest, desist from cooking up unprofessional cause of death before and after autopsy is performed.

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