Alcohol-related parasuicide among married people

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Summary

Although parasuicide has been widely studied, its indirect relationship with alcohol abuse has received less attention. The present study examines the incidence of alcohol-related parasuicide at a Pietermaritzburg general hospital. Over 40% of married parasuicide women cited their husbands' abuse of alcohol and its associated violent behaviour as precipitants to their self-destructive acts. However, in contrast to overseas findings, recent alcohol intake was not prevalent in the parasuicide women themselves. This difference appears to be culturally rooted.

In this report the term 'parasuicide' is based on Kreitman's definition and refers to a non-fatal act of deliberate self-injury, or the ingestion of substances in excess of any prescribed or recognised therapeutic dose.

The role of alcohol in parasuicide has been the focus of research for the last few decades. Connely commenting on the high incidence of alcohol abuse in studies of parasuicide in the USA, pointed out that approximately 25% of alcohol abusers attempt suicide at some time in their lives. In the UK, a history of recent alcohol intake was found in 50-60% of men and 25-45% of women admitted to hospital because of self-destructive behaviour. Research in the RSA has also shown that alcohol abuse is associated with parasuicide, and that the risk of parasuicide is increased in patients with a history of alcohol abuse. In a study of completed suicides, Gangat et al. reported that 30% of subjects had been alcohol abusers.

Alcohol abuse has also been indirectly implicated as a cause of stress and as a precipitant of parasuicide in members of the family of an abuser. Gath noted that excessive drinking is liable to cause severe disruption in family life, with marital conflict being inevitable. He reported that wives of alcohol abusers often complained of anxiety and depression, and many who were admitted to hospital because of self-poisoning attempts blamed their husbands' abuse of alcohol.

It has been noted that the likelihood of marital disruption is greater in alcohol-abusing, than in non-alcohol-abusing households. Corenblum, in a study on spouse abuse, reported that individuals were more likely to engage in family violence when intoxicated than when sober. A more recent investigation showed that individuals diagnosed as being alcohol abusers were more likely to be involved in violent marital conflict than those without such problems.

Against this background, we decided to identify the incidence of alcohol-related parasuicide, including alcohol-related spouse abuse, as a precipitant to parasuicide in the Pietermaritzburg area.

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Patients and methods

This study was conducted at Northdale Hospital, Pietermaritzburg, which caters for the coloured and Indian population groups. A retrospective survey was carried out on the clinical records of all married parasuicide patients presenting to the Psychology Clinic during the 6-month period ending at 30 June 1987. Details relating to age, sex, ethnic group and the primary factor precipitating parasuicide (as cited by the patients) were incorporated into the study. In view of the criticism levelled at the methodology of determining the reliability of information provided by parasuicide patients, an attempt was made to corroborate the precipitants cited upon initial interview with information provided by family members.

Cases in which alcohol intake (by the patient or spouse) was directly involved in the parasuicide were categorised as 'alcohol-related', e.g. a woman who used parasuicide to escape the violence meted out by her drunken husband. All those cases not involving alcohol, or where alcohol intake was not described as a precipitant, were regarded as 'non-alcohol-related'. The precipitating factors were independently categorised by the authors.

The criteria set out in Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders were used to identify alcohol abuse.

Results

Of the 37 subjects in the sample, 33 (26 women and 7 men) were Indian and 4 (3 women and 1 man) were coloured. Their ages ranged from 22 to 43 years (mean 29.4 years). The most significant finding was that none of the 29 female parasuicides had drunk alcohol. Only 1 male parasuicide showed recent alcohol intake; he had a history of parasuicide while intoxicated. Twelve women (41.4%) cited alcohol abuse and associated violence by their husbands as precipitants of their self-destructive acts. In all instances the violence had been directed towards the patient and in some cases towards the children as well. One male parasuicide described his wife's alcohol abuse as a precipitant, and said he was unable to continue living with a wife who abused alcohol and neglected the home and family.

Discussion

The fact that 41.4% of the women cited their husbands' alcohol abuse and related violent behaviour as precipitants of parasuicide is suggestive of the high levels of stress generated in these households. This finding is consistent with the figures reported by Gath for the UK. Parasuicide is a clear indication that these women were unable to cope with the stresses associated with an environment of alcohol abuse and violent behaviour.

In contrast with findings overseas, this study revealed recent alcohol intake in only male parasuicide, while no alcohol intake was noted among the women. This low incidence is consistent with earlier research findings on Indian parasuicides in the Durban area. The distinct absence of alcohol intake among the women in the present study appears to be culturally related since the sample was predominantly Indian and alcohol consumption is not traditionally acceptable among women in...
this population group. In an extensive study of alcohol consumption in South Africa, Van der Burgh found that only 2% of Indian women consumed alcohol. He noted that the cultural and religious norms which militate against alcohol intake were still prevalent, despite the process of acculturation and the increasing emancipation of Indian women.

In conclusion, it is recommended that personnel involved in the management of alcohol abusers be aware of the parasuicide potential in the spouses of such people.

REFERENCES


Psigiaatriese aspekte van gesinsmoord

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Summary

There has been very little research done on family slayings in the RSA. The concept is defined and a short survey of the literature is provided. Five case studies of patients who were referred to Weskoppies Hospital after being involved in family killings are described; a diagnosis of depression was made in all 5 cases. The clinical implications of manslaughter and depression are discussed, and suggestions are offered for future research into psychiatric factors involved in family killings.


Daar is tot dusver baie min wetenskaplike navorsing oor gesinsmoord in die RSA gedoen. Slegs 'n paar artikels oor die onderwerp is in akademiese joemale, rydskrifte en koerante gebaseer. Dit word dus onderskei van 'familicide', waar vernietiging van die familie-eenheid die einddoel skyn te wees en wat binne die kategorie van massamoord val.2

De Jongh van Arkel sê dan ook dat verwarring oor die onderwerp die gevolg is van die feit dat gesinsmoord nie heel aan die begin duidelik afgegrens is van ander verbandhoudende handelinge nie. Gewoonlik word gesinsmoord as 'n vorm van gesingeweld beskryf. Ten spyte van die gewelddagde handeling wat hier betrokke is, blyk dit uit die spesifieke aard van die situasie en die handelinge me. Gewoonlik word gesinsmoord as 'n vorm van slaag maak nie en in slegs 5% van die gevalle word gesinsmoord aan 'n depressie gely. Goldney rapporteer 4 gevalle van moord gevolg deur selfmoord, waarvan 3 van die beskuldiges aan 'n depressie gely het. 'n Oorsig van 104 gevalle van manslag gevolg deur selfmoord wat gebaseer is op verslae van die Los Angeles se polisie-afdeling, het 19 gevalle gevind waarvan 3 van die beskuldiges aan 'n depressie gely het.2

Gesinsmoord word dus onderskei van 'familicide', waar vernietiging van die familie-eenheid die einddoel skyn te wees en wat binne die kategorie van massamoord val.2

Gesinsmoord neem toenemende afmetings aan in die RSA. Graaf het gevind dat vanaf 1983 tot 1985 daar 'n 70% toename was. Hy het persberigte oor die 3-jarige tydperk bestudeer en gevind dat gesinsmoord hoofsaaklik tot die wit gemeenskap beperk is.

Die verband tussen depressie en manslag is verwaarloos in kliniese psigiaatrie en literatuur in hierdie verband is skaars.

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