

Case Report

Autopsy Finding of Fatal Child Physical Abuse by Stepfather: Case Report



Galih Endradita M¹, Muhammad Kholil Ikhsan^{1*}, William Daniel Napitupulu¹, Ahmad Yudianto^{1,2}

1. Department of Forensic Medicine and Medicolegal, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia.

2. Department of Forensic Medicine and Medicolegal, Bhayangkara Pusdik Sabhara Porong Hospital, Sidoarjo, Indonesia.

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ABSTRACT

Child physical abuse (CPA) is prone to occur in developing areas. Aside from stressors in the home, the presence of a stepfather is another cause of CPA. The case reported here is of a 3-year-old girl who experienced fatal physical abuse by her stepfather. On external examination, bruises were found on the forehead, right and left cheeks, chin, chest, back, upper and lower left arms, pubic lips, upper and lower right legs, and lower left legs, and blisters on the lips. On internal examination, severe damage was found to internal organs. This paper also discussed how this case was viewed from the Indonesian legal framework.

* Corresponding Author:

Muhammad Kholil Ikhsan, MD.

Address: Department of Forensic Medicine and Medicolegal, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia.

Tel: +62 (813) 34240202

E-mail: mkholil.ikhsan@gmail.com

1. Introductions

Child maltreatment, which includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect, is a major public health concern [1, 2]. Child physical abuse (CPA) is the second most common form of violence against children after sexual violence. CPA is prone to occur, especially in developing countries [3]. Punches and slaps on the upper body, face, and head are frequent in this violence [4], and almost 80% of all perpetrators are parents [5]. In the Indonesian legal framework, violence against children in the household is regulated in “law number 23 of 2004 concerning the elimination of domestic violence” and “law number 35 of 2014 concerning Protection.” On this occasion, we presented the CPA case that resulted in the victim’s death, according to the investigation of the perpetrator by the victim’s stepfather.

2. Case Presentation

Her 3-year-old daughter died while being treated in the emergency room. According to her stepfather, the child had previously fallen in the bathroom when he was about to be buried. According to neighbors, other family members suspected violence because there were signs of abuse all over the victim’s body. Other family members who witnessed the abuse of the victim by his stepfather reported it to the local police, and the application letter for visum et repertum was submitted to the [Bhayangkara Porong Hospital](#), East Java for a forensic examination to determine the cause of death.

3. Results

External examination

We found dilated blood vessels and bleeding spots on the mucous membranes of the upper and lower eyelids. Bluish lips, mucous membranes of the lips, fingertips, fingernails, and toenails, bruises on the forehead, right and left cheeks, chin, chest, arms, and back, upper and lower left pubic lips, upper and lower right legs, and lower left legs, and blisters on the lips were also reported in the case ([Figure 1](#)).

Internal examination

Dilation of large cerebral blood vessels, bleeding spots on the right and left kidney slices, right and left rib fractures, blood infiltration in the upper and lower left lungs, right and left rib muscles, spleen tears, and abdominal cavity bleeding (50 mL) were found on internal examination ([Figure 2](#)).

4. Discussion

Economic, social, and psychological stressors are associated with an increased risk of CPA [6]. This case occurred in November 2021 when the COVID-19 pandemic was still ongoing and the pandemic was a natural disaster. Previous research has shown that job loss among the elderly during the COVID-19 pandemic is an important risk factor for cases of CPA. One of the causes of injury and death in early childhood is CPA [7]. The causes of CPA cases in the household are usually exacerbated by the presence of a stepfather. Physical abuse was reported in 34.0% of children with a stepfather versus 17.6% of those living with a genetic father [8]. In order to prevent violent incidents of children, the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) today develops an extensive program for the prevention of physical abuse of children [9].

On external examination, the victim was found to have bruises on his forehead, right and left cheeks, chin, chest, back, upper and lower left arms, pubic lips, upper and lower right legs, and lower left legs, and abrasions on his lips. Physical violence is found when bruises are found on soft body parts, such as ears or neck, and patterned or grouped bruises [10].

An internal examination found severe damage to internal organs, namely a fracture of the seventh left rib that tore the left lung organ. A blow to the chest area can directly damage internal organs, such as the lungs and heart, but indirectly can also cause inflammation of the organs [11]. In this case, a histopathological examination of lung tissue with alveoli with bleeding in the stroma ([Figure 3](#)), is one of the fatal traumas to the lungs. Damage to the alveoli causes lung function to not work optimally, which is a life-threatening condition and can cause death if not recognized and treated quickly, and the patient will experience acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) [12].

A ruptured lung due to broken ribs can also cause bleeding in the pleural cavity, also known as hemothorax. Hemothorax is a collection of blood in the pleural cavity and is usually caused by chest trauma [13], both causing rib fractures resulting in rupture of the intercostal arteries. Hemothorax can cause death if not detected and treated early; less than 400 mL is classified as minimal hemothorax, while 400 mL to 1000 mL is classified as hemothorax [14]. In a massive hemothorax, the blood loss is more than 1000 mL. Delayed hemothorax can occur from 2 hours to 44 days after trauma to the thoracic region, especially resulting in rib fractures [15]. In this case, there was also damage to the spleen organ in the form of

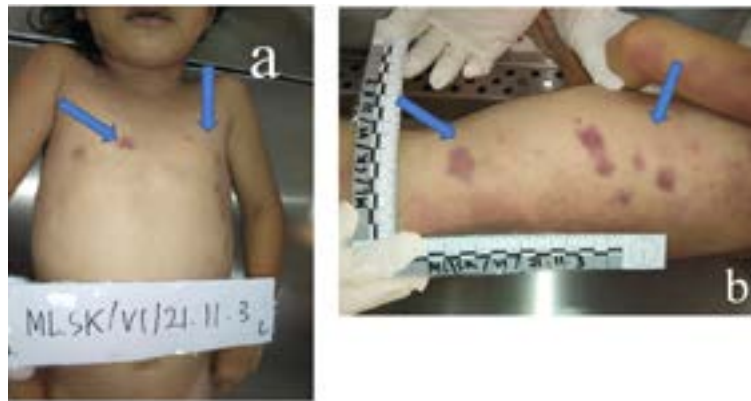


Figure 1. External examination

A. Contusion on the right and left chest, B. Contusion on the chest side and abdomen side

tears due to blunt force trauma in the chest, back, and abdomen. Spleen injury is a common abdominal organ injury that can result in death if not treated immediately [16].

Medicolegal aspects of Indonesia's legal framework

In Indonesia, the regulation on domestic violence is regulated in "law number 23 of 2004 concerning the elimination of domestic violence", the articles relating to this case are explained as follows [17]:

Article 2 paragraph (1) explains the scope of domestic violence:

- a. Husband, wife, and children;
- b. People who have family relationships with people as referred to in letter a because of blood relations, marriage, breastfeeding, care, and guardianship, who live in the household; and/or
- c. People who work to help the household and stay in the household.

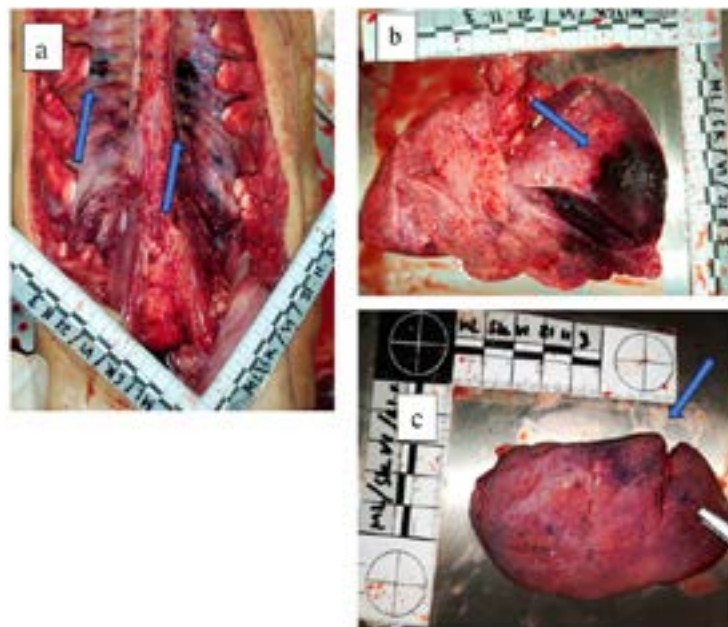


Figure 2. Internal examination

A. Contusion in the inner costae, B. Contusion at left lung, C. Rupture of the spleen

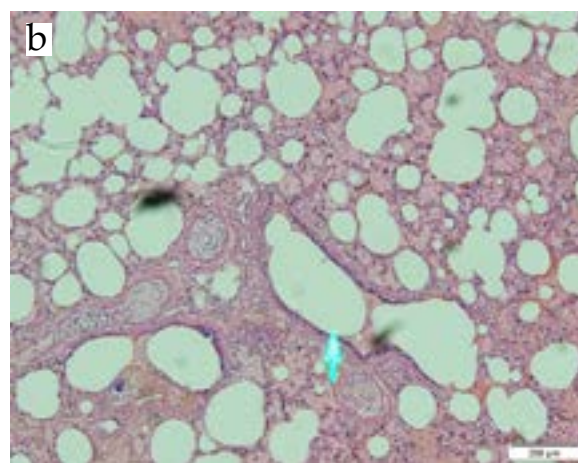
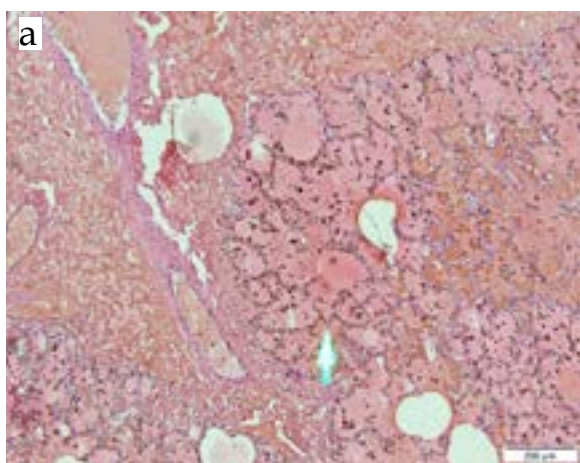


Figure 3. Histopathological examination of lung tissue

A. Dilated alveoli, B. Bleeding in the stroma

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Article 5 describes the types of violence:

- a. Physical abuse;
- b. Psychological violence;
- c. Sexual violence;
- d. Household neglect.

Article 44 paragraphs 1, 2, 3, and 4 regulates criminal provisions for perpetrators:

1. Anyone who commits physical violence within the confines of the household referred to in paragraph A of Article 5 will be sentenced to a maximum of 5 years imprisonment or a maximum fine of 5 years or a maximum fine of Rp. 15,000,000.00 (fifteen million rupiahs).

2. If the action mentioned in paragraph 1 causes illness or severe injury to the victim, he will be punished with imprisonment for a maximum of ten years or a fine of a maximum of Rp. 30,000,000.00 (thirty million rupiahs).

3. If the action mentioned in paragraph 2 leads to the death of the defendant, the maximum punishment is 15 years of imprisonment or a maximum fine of Rp. 45,000,000.00 (forty-five million rupiahs).

4. In case the act mentioned in paragraph 1 is done by the husband against the wife or vice versa, which does not cause illness or hinder the performance of official work or livelihood or daily activities., the person shall be punished with imprisonment for a maximum of four months or a maximum fine of Rp. 5,000,000.00 (five million rupiahs).

5. Conclusion

The death of this child was caused by blunt trauma to the chest and back resulting in broken ribs that tore the lungs, resulting in impaired respiratory function and asphyxia, blunt trauma to the abdomen causing injury to the spleen, and the above conditions caused internal bleeding. The perpetrator, namely the stepfather, can be sentenced in accordance with law number 23 of 2004 concerning the elimination of domestic violence and in particular law number 35 of 2014 concerning Child Protection Article 80 paragraph 3 where the perpetrator commits severe abuse up to the loss of the child's life so that sentenced to 15 years in prison. In handling natural disasters in the form of epidemics, it is necessary to have a social approach for every head of the household so that physical violence against children does not occur again.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

This article has no intervention on humans or animals by any of the authors. In addition, information about the human case study group is anonymous in this study.

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Authors' contributions

All authors equally contributed to preparing this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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