

Introduction

Violence against the elderly is an emerging and underreported public health problem. Criminal and violent deaths constitute an entity that deserves special attention in a population of defenseless persons with individual vulnerability. In order to concentrate prevention efforts on this population, it may be better to start by trying to better understand the circumstances of occurrence and the thanatological characteristics of criminal deaths of the elderly.

We aim in this work to study the epidemiological and thanatological particularities of criminal deaths of elderly subjects in the Kairouan region.

Materials and Methods

We conducted a retrospective study carried out at the Forensic Medicine Department of Ibn El Jazzar University Hospital in Kairouan, over a period of **seven years (07)** (01/01/2012-31/12/2018). This study involved all deaths of homicide victims aged over 60 years old who had been forensically autopsied at our department.

Results

We counted **10** homicides committed on elderly subjects during the study period, which represents **0.4%** of our total necrotic activity and **7.4%** of the total violent deaths of elderly subjects.

- The average age of the victims was **69 years ± 3.9** with age extremes ranging from 60 to 89 years. The sex ration (H/F) was 2.33 of which 7 **male** victims out of 10 (**70%**) (**Fig.1**).

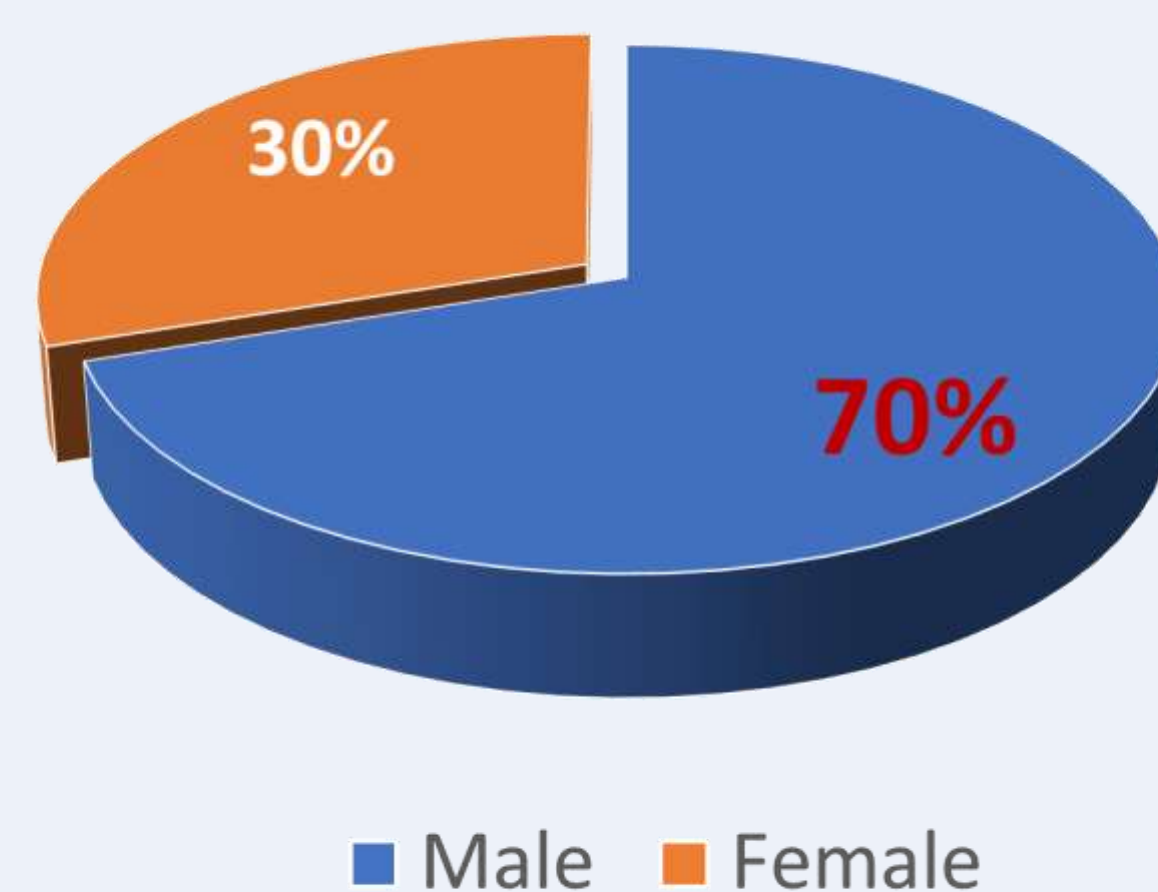


Fig.1 : Distribution of homicide cases by gender

- Of the cases identified, only 3 victims (30%) had comorbidity disorders of diabetes and a history of underlying heart disease.
- The notion of **family conflicts** or with the entourage was found in half of the victims (50%). The notion of inheritance and land-sharing were the main topics of conflict between families.
- Most of these homicides were committed in **the homes of the victims** (60%), including 3 cases found dead in their homes, while 40% of these crimes were committed in a public place, including a half-buried victim in an abandoned field.
- These criminal deaths were mainly perpetrated by a **sharp object like a knife** (**Fig.2**) or a blunt object (respectively 60% and 30% of cases).

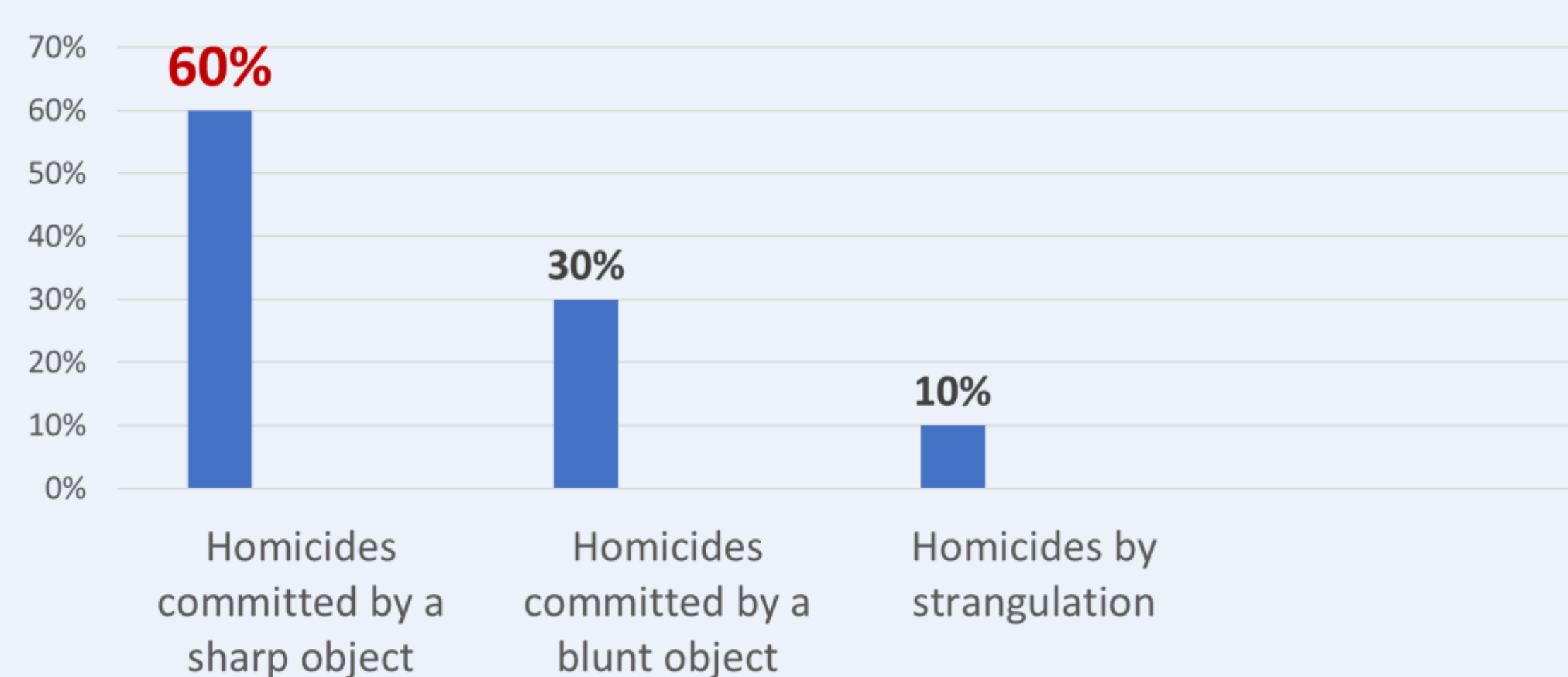


Fig.2: Distribution of homicide cases by means used

- At the time of the autopsy, the perpetrator was **unknown** in 6 cases (60%) while he was the son of the victims in 2 cases (20%).

- It was a **single attacker** in almost all victims except for the case of an 86-year-old woman living alone who was allegedly the victim of a stabbing and strangling complex homicide with signs in favor of recent violent sexual assault. The culprit was identified as his nephew who was under the influence of drugs at the time of the facts and after further investigations.

- Additional toxicological examinations were performed for all cases and found to be negative

Discussion

- The epidemiological profile of criminal deaths of elderly subjects that emerges from our study is an elderly male subject, whose average age is 69 years, with a cardiovascular history, living alone in most cases and in conflict with his children. The perpetrator is usually unknown to the victim and the use of a sharp object such as a knife is the most used means.
- We also noticed that most of the assailants after the court investigation were found to be under the influence of narcotic substances at the time of the incident, which sometimes explains the violence of the crimes committed.

- As the percentage of older people in the population increases, violence against older persons is a growing social problem. According to some studies, men and women aged 60 and over [1] are much less likely to be victims of violence than younger adults. Nevertheless, the criminal deaths and the homicides of the elderly are recognized as a social problem unfortunately not represented compared to the accidental deaths and natural deaths.
- According to a Canadian study published in 2009, more than 2% of all Canadians aged 55 and over living in the 10 provinces were reported being victims of a violent crime [2].

- Several elements can be mentioned to explain this phenomenon. These murders usually occur without outside witnesses, in the intimacy of the family environment. If there is a trauma, the story of an accidental fall will often be invoked. In addition, physical disabilities or cognitive impairment that some seniors experience can make them more vulnerable and affect the nature of the violence they experience.
- According to a review of the literature, more than half of these homicides are committed by a family member, one-quarter by an acquaintance and almost 10% by a stranger [1].
- Homicides of senior women by a family member are most often perpetrated by the spouse or adult son of the victim. While older men are most often killed by their adult son or son-in-law [1]. These crimes are mainly motivated by frustration, anger or despair, or after an argument [1].
- In a majority of cases, perpetrators use physical force (for example strangling, pushing, slapping, punching) or uttering threats (verbally or by gestures) instead of using a weapon. However, when a weapon is present, it was rarely a firearm. The weapons most often involved are knives, blunt objects and other weapons. This finding was found in our results. This can be explained mainly by restrictive regulations that make it difficult to access firearms in our country.
- As these criminal deaths are violent deaths, a medicolegal autopsy must be performed in these cases. Forensic investigations remain of vital importance by specifying the exact cause of death, the means used and the nature of the traces of violence. They thus make it possible to enlighten the justice and to legally qualify the acts of violence committed.

Conclusion

The increase in the occurrence of the criminal deaths of the elderly suggests a significant need for strategies to prevent these acts of violence. Our country is not spared by this phenomenon.

References

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