

PLATE 7.

Newly Born Child. Suffocation by a Portion of the Membranes.

Among the causes which may hinder the respiration of a newly born child, and thus, even without the co-operation of its mother, lead to its death, must be counted its birth within unruptured membranes, or with a portion thereof situate over its face or entire head.

Plate 7 refers to a medicolegal case of the latter variety.

The child—a female—was found November 30th, wrapped in white linen, under a refuse-box in a gateway.

It was 46 cm. long, weighed 1820 grams, of a pale fleshy color, with slight panniculus adiposus, uninjured. The entire head was covered with a serous, transparent, in part dried membrane, which, leaving the region about the left lower jaw exposed, covered the rest of the face, being everywhere in close apposition to the skin, partly smoothly, partly in small folds, closing both the eyes and the orifices of the respiratory organs. Under the chin and running almost horizontally with the upper part of the neck the membrane was irregularly torn, the torn edge being much dried.

The necropsy revealed some air in the slightly ecchymotic lungs; some air in the stomach. The latter, as also the upper 4-5 cm. of the duodenum, floats upon water. Otherwise no noteworthy discoveries. In the lower epiphysis of the femur no center of ossification demonstrable.

The opinion was expressed that the premature child was born alive, and that it died of suffocation, manifestly due to closure of the orifices of the respiratory organs by a portion of the membranes covering the face. It is scarcely to be supposed that this portion of the membranes was intentionally placed over the face of the child, as such a procedure presupposes a certain special knowledge and much dexterity. It is most probable that this portion of the membranes was torn away during the process of birth by the advancing head, and that the child was born with the head covered therewith, which occurrence has frequently been observed, and is sometimes—however, without justification—designated as “birth with a caul.” The fact that air was found in the lungs and in the stomach does not invalidate this assumption, as the region about the left lower jaw was uncovered, whence some air might reach the respiratory orifices. As the portion of membrane was transparent and very thin, and while moist became closely applied to the skin, it is not certain that this impediment to respiration was observed by the mother, and in consequence it cannot be unconditionally asserted that she intentionally permitted it to remain, and thus killed the child by withholding the requisites of life.

As there was no caput succedaneum demonstrable, the labor must have been rapid.

