

The Modern Value of Clinical Autopsies

O Atual Valor das Autópsias Clínicas

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Palavras-chave: Autópsia; Infecções por VIH; Leucoencefalopatia Multifocal Progressiva; Terapêutica Anti-Retrovírica; Virus da Imunodeficiência Humana.

Dear Editor,

In a recent number of this journal, Augusto L et al published an interesting article about progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy (PML) in HIV-infected patients.¹ The authors reported seventeen fatal cases but they did not mention if any post-mortem was requested. So I write to highlight the scientific value of the neuropathological examination, especially in fatal cases, because clinical autopsies have made substantial contributions to our understanding of the natural history of HIV/AIDS infection.

In addition to attacking the immune system, HIV can enter in the central nervous system (CNS), with potentially

deleterious effects. The various neurological complications include opportunistic infections, cancer and HIV associated neurocognitive disorder. According to Clifford D, discovering what may be going on in the CNS after years of HIV infection control is an emerging challenge.² The importance of the autopsy in neurological disease is often not appreciated.³ In some of these cases, the autopsy is the only way in which brain tissue can be obtained for diagnosis and research.³ For example, in the set of PML, as Augusto L et al said, surgical brain biopsy should be made only when John Cunningham virus-DNA detection by polymerase chain reaction (PCR) in the cerebrospinal fluid is not concordant with clinical course and imagiological findings.

Hospital autopsy rates have been falling in Portugal and worldwide for over half a century.⁴ The downward trend in the rate of clinical autopsies has been extensively documented in the literature.⁴ This decline is of concern considering its benefits.⁴ To change this reality is not enough to write about it. Clinicians must request clinical autopsies, which implies speaking with families explaining the importance of the post-mortem, and pathologists must relearn to enjoy this procedure.

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