

Stephen Gately - Fluid on the Lungs – But Why?

The sad death of Stephen Gately, the Boyzone singer, has highlighted the duality of the media and a difficult truth. It is almost like the emperor's new clothes. The press is willing to accept that it was "natural causes" without enquiring what they were. The Daily Mail article by Jan Moir which questioned this, sadly went for sensationalism and not science, and distractedly highlighted aspects of his life and case which were immaterial to the search for truth. The appropriate attack on them was a proportionate response to a disproportionate article.

However the truth remains. 33 year old adults, be they heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual or asexual do NOT die from natural causes such as "fluid on the lung" without something else causing this.

It may be natural, such as inherited cardiac disease causing a weakening of the heart muscle or damage to the heart muscle caused by a virus, it may be, although unlikely, acutely an infection of the lung, but all would show up at autopsy.

It may be an inherited instability of the electrical system and wiring of the heart, which would not show at autopsy, but if so, his family should be tested in case they have the pathology as well.

It may be due to inhalation of toxic substances by accident, such as smoke or chemicals, from who knows where, however the truth, however uncomfortable, is that if there were no signs of anatomical damage or pathology, the most likely cause would be drugs in some way either causing a chronic problem with the heart, although this would show up, or an electrical instability of the heart, possibly coupled with an excited state, either due to drugs or a natural social high or dancing or fighting or running.

It may also have been drugs causing a weakening of heart muscles or precipitating abnormal heart rhythms, or inhalation of substances in an uncontrolled way or breath holding games.

Even if the toxicology report is negative, this still does not rule drugs out. Many substances which cause electrical instability of the heart are not looked for, even in the most thorough forensic testing at the moment such as ghat/khat metabolites such as cathinone, or will have left the body already such as the solvents (glue etc.) or amyl nitrate type substances found in poppers. Even alcohol may acutely poison the heart muscle leading to "fluid on the lung" as may other substances. Others may also cause electrical instability, abnormal heart rhythms and then compromise the ability of the heart to clear blood out of the lungs.

Sudden Sniffing Deaths from glue and petrol and industrial solvents were a mystery for a long time but are now recognized as an autopsy/toxicology negative mechanism of death, many deaths in Police Custody which are autopsy/toxicologically negative are suggested to be due to an interplay of cardiac stimulation by drugs or illness, coupled with stress, physical exertion, and/or "proportionate" restraint.

The world wanting to know the truth about a wonderful singer should not be hood winked by either extreme of the argument be that unexplained "fluid on the lung" or a homophobic diatribe!

Dr Malcolm VandenBurg BSc MBBS MISMA FCP FFPM FRCP

T: 020 7435 9386 / 020 8449 9942
M: 07850 049 134
E: consultrum@hotmail.com
W: www.malcolmvandenburgh.co.uk

17 October 2009