Deaths in Custody: what have we learnt from mixed martial arts?
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Learning objectives:
At the end of this presentation, the participant will be able to

1. Identify various types of chokeholds
2. Describe how the popularity of mixed martial arts can play a role in deaths in custody
3. Describe the inherent risks of using chokeholds during the restraint of a combative individual

Abstract:
Various forms of asphyxia have been implicated in many deaths in custody. Traumatic asphyxia, positional asphyxia and “sleeper” or “choke” holds can place an individual in a life-threatening position either alone or in combination, especially if comorbidities such as underlying health issues and illicit drug use exist.

A recent increase in the popularity of the mixed martial arts among law enforcement and civilians has implications in the investigation of deaths in custody. Mixed martial arts differ from other combat sports such as boxing or kickboxing which use strikes such as punches and kicks. Mixed martial artists have added other techniques to their repertoire to dispatch their opponents which include the use of various joint locks and a variety of chokeholds. A law enforcement officer trained in such techniques may be tempted to use them while restraining a combative individual.

Most forensic pathologists are familiar with the classic choke hold which involves compression of the victim’s neck with the perpetrator’s bicep and forearm in a vice-like maneuver. Other variations of this exist which involve the use of the victim’s clothing or portions of the perpetrators clothing. The perpetrator’s legs can also be used in a similar way to compress the neck. These variations are aimed, not at occluding the airway, but instead are used to compress both carotid arteries and jugular veins with the goal of gaining compliance and/or rendering the person unconscious. When properly executed these maneuvers can result in unconsciousness in as little as 10 seconds. If the hold is released quickly the individual can regain consciousness with no significant sequelae except for some possible short-term memory loss.

A significant danger exists if a law enforcement officer were to apply a chokehold while attempting to subdue a civilian. Often these altercations occur in a highly emotionally charged volatile atmosphere where more than one law-enforcement officer may be involved in the attempt to subdue a combative individual. In these situations, it can be a challenging for the law enforcement officer to monitor the physical well-being of the suspect. An individual may appear conscious after a choke hold because their eyes often remain open and their body may not be completely limp. In this scenario, the chokehold may continuously be applied for several minutes in the mistaken belief that
the individual may still pose a threat to law enforcement personnel. Unfortunately, a potentially fatal outcome can be the result.

This presentation will describe the various forms of choke holds and the inherent danger to individuals when law enforcement officers employ them while attempting to subdue someone who is combative.