HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

Giovanni Maria Lancisi’s description of commotio cordis

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Commotio cordis is the syndrome of sudden death after blunt trauma to the lower part of the chest.1,2 It has received attention in recent times for its prevention (especially in contact sports) and has led to basic studies to define a mechanism.3 One of the earliest sports-related cases was sudden death after a cricket ball injury in 1898.4

We recently identified an early description of this syndrome by the papal physician Giovanni Maria Lancisi5 in his well-known book “De Subitaneis Mortibus” (Fig 1). In chapter 10 of Book I, “On the causes of unexpected death arising from the heart and the great vessels.”6,7 Lancisi describes a remarkable case: “I once saw the knot of life instantly undone when a man received a powerful blow from a fist under the xiphoid cartilage.”

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“ DE SUBITANEIS MORTIBUS ”
Chapter 10 (Book I). “On the causes of Unexpected Death Arising from the Heart and the Great Vessels”.


KEYWORDS  Commotio cordis; Sudden cardiac death; Ventricular fibrillation (Heart Rhythm 2020;17:674–675)

Dr Shivkumar was supported by NIH OT2 OT2OD023848 & OT2OD028201. Address reprint requests and correspondence: Dr Kalyanam Shivkumar, UCLA Cardiac Arrhythmia Center, UCLA Health System, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, 100 UCLA Medical Plaza, Suite 660, Los Angeles CA 90095. E-mail address: kshivkumar@mednet.ucla.edu.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrthm.2020.01.020
instantly undone when a man received a powerful blow from a fist under the xiphoid cartilage.” This description of the anatomical location and instantaneous death is consistent with the typical blunt force trauma to the chest that causes ventricular fibrillation. Therefore, Lancisi’s description is worthy of being referenced in this context as one of the earliest descriptions of this syndrome.

Acknowledgments
We thank Andrea Natale, MD, FHRS, and Luigi DiBiase, MD, PhD, for providing translations of material from Latin and Italian sources.

References