

# Night Deaths of Asian Men Unexplained

## Healthy Indonesians, Filipinos, Japanese Expire 'With a Snap'

By KARL SCHOENBERGER,  
*Associated Press*

TOKYO—Each year hundreds of apparently healthy young Japanese die suddenly in their sleep, sometimes with a gasp or shout, and doctors do not know why.

Reports of similar deaths in the Philippines and among Indochinese refugees in the United States have given rise to speculation by medical experts that the disease might be common to ethnic groups throughout Asia.

In Japan, the mysterious killer is called *pokkuri*, an onomatopoeic term that suggests a demise that strikes unexpectedly, with a "snap."

Although the fatal episode in *pokkuri* disease is much like a heart attack, experts say victims, mostly men in their 20s and 30s, are generally robust and rarely have a history of symptoms related to heart disease.

### Can Only Guess

"It's not a matter of the heart being good or bad," said Dr. Michio Inui of the Tokyo Metropolitan Medical Examiner's Office, which studies *pokkuri*. "They seem to be dying of heart failure, but we can only guess about the cause."

Eighty *pokkuri* deaths were reported in Tokyo alone in 1980, all but four of them men. No nationwide statistics have been compiled, but Inui estimates that at least 500 Japanese and perhaps more than 1,000 die of *pokkuri* in a typical year.

Two American researchers recently wrote to a prominent British medical journal that a baffling phenomenon called "nocturnal death syndrome" has killed about 72 Laotian, Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees in the United States over the last six years.

In a letter in a recent issue of *The Lancet*, Roy C. Baron of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta and Robert H. Kirschner of the Cook County Medical Examiner's Office in Chicago noted "striking" parallels between reports of *pokkuri* deaths and nocturnal death syndrome.

A deadly disease called *bangungut*  
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attacks sleeping young men in the Philippines. There are no current statistics on bangungut deaths, but Filipinos believe it strikes those who go to sleep immediately after a heavy meal. Tradition has it that death is preceded by nightmares.

Dr. Ikuo Ishiyama, a specialist in forensic medicine at Tokyo University, said his research on *pokkuri* suggests that death may be caused by a sudden "coronary artery spasm."

But Ishiyama said investigation showed no evidence of hardening of the arteries, which would be expected in normal cases of heart

failure. Nor did victims in his study, aged 15 through 33, appear to smoke heavily or suffer from stress, he said in an interview.

Ishiyama did discover a pattern tissue death in the heart muscles of *pokkuri* victims that he attributes to depletion of a protein called myoglobin. His hunch is that the loss of myoglobin, which serves as a reservoir for oxygen and carbon dioxide, is the key to unraveling the *pokkuri* mystery.

He also thinks *pokkuri*, *bangungut* and sudden death among Indochinese refugees are related. "We can't help but suspect it's the same," he said. "The symptoms are the

same—young men without medical problems are essentially dying in the same way, without warning."

Most cases of nocturnal death syndrome in the United States have been reported among an ethnic group known as the Hmong, tribesmen who traditionally dwell in mountainous regions of northern Laos, Burma and southern China.

The Hmong were fierce anti-communist fighters during the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's covert war in northern Laos, and more than 100,000 of them fled Laos after the 1975 communist takeover.

In one drive against the Hmong, communist forces allegedly used

chemical toxins against their villages. One persistent hypothesis on nighttime sudden death among Laotian refugees is that it is a delayed effect of this poisoning.

Baron and Kirschner noted, however, that refugees have described similar deaths in their homelands, "suggesting this phenomenon antedated their departure from Southeast Asia."

Some doctors in the Philippines suspect bangungut is caused when relatively benign toxins, such as polypeptides, are ingested in large quantities. An overdose of fish sauce is one suspected killer. But Dr. Ernesto Domingo, chairman of the research committee of the University of the Philippines College of Medicine, called these theories

"guesswork."

Ishiyama said he doubted external toxins figure in Japan's sudden nocturnal deaths. Autopsies have not shown any such link, he said.

He added that advances in medical care, rather than the spread of modern chemicals, are probably responsible for the conspicuous rise in reports of nocturnal sudden deaths.

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