

# Sweet summer cherries and fatal ileus: a story from the past

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## Introduction

We have recently read the two articles by Byard and Winskog in the journal with great interest [1, 2]. Both of them are quite informative and the paper on lethal gallstone ileus has inspired us to write this paper.

The Institute of Forensic Medicine was officially founded in 1923 by Professor Milovan Milovanović (1884–1948), as a part of School of Medicine—University of Belgrade, which was established 3 years previously. During his professional life, professor Milovanović collected a great number of forensic specimens and founded a small museum as a part of the Institute. Since its founding, medical students at the school have had the opportunity to visit the museum collection to become familiar with interesting past forensic cases. In addition, the museum has been in the possession of the majority of forensic autopsy records in the Institute's archive since 1920. Unfortunately, some records are missing due to the military occupation of Belgrade during the Second World War.

## Case outline

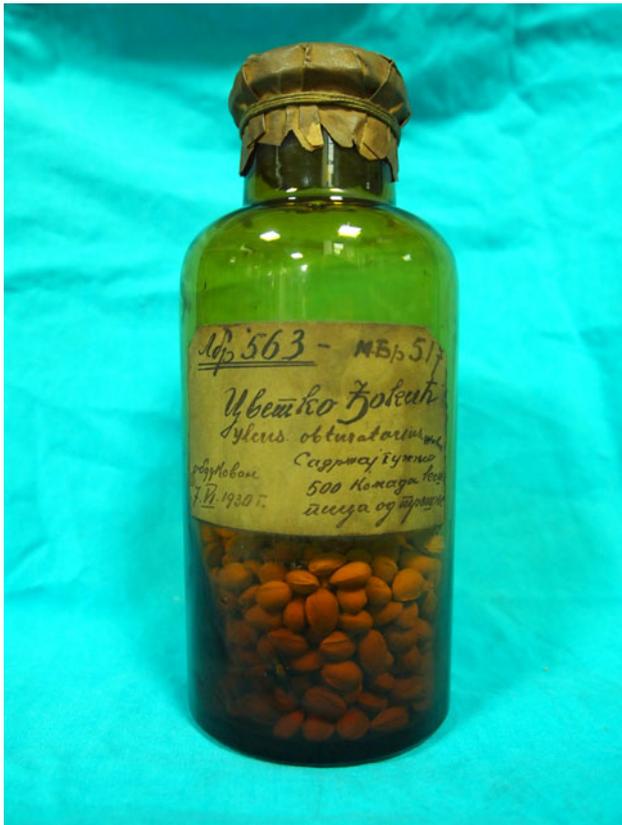
One of the most interesting museum pieces from the collection is a jar containing a large number of cherry pits—museum specimen M No 517 (Fig. 1). Attached to it is a label with the following text: “L No 563, M No 517,

Cvetko Djokić, Ileus obturatorius, Autopsy on June 7th, 1930, Content of the distal section of the large bowel—500 cherry pits”. By virtue of the date of the autopsy and the name of deceased, the case has been identified in the record-keeping journal for 1930 (i.e., L No 563). This was forensic case No. 167 for that year: a male farmer, aged 61, from a village of Veliko Selo (near Belgrade), who died on the 6th of June at the University Clinic for Surgery. A forensic autopsy was performed the following day. The cause of death was attributed to an acute obstruction of the large bowel caused by the great number of cherry pits he had swallowed. Unfortunately, a complete autopsy record for this case has not been found in our archives.

## Discussion

Though usually surgical emergencies, some abdominal conditions go untreated because the victim is either a solitary person, living alone with no opportunity to call for help, or declines to seek medical assistance [3]. Intestinal obstruction (ileus) can be caused by any condition that prevents the normal flow of chyme through the intestinal lumen or a failure of normal intestinal motility in the absence of an obstructing lesion [4]. Signs and symptoms of ileus may vary depending on the level and completion of the obstruction: simple obstruction is the mechanical blockage of the lumen by a lesion or by obstructive gallstones, fecaliths, bezoars or foreign bodies [1, 4, 5]; colonic obstruction usually presents itself as hypogastric pain and abdominal distension, as well as constipation and failure to pass flatus [5]; signs of dehydration, hypovolemia and metabolic acidosis may be observed as early as 24 h after the occurrence of a complete obstruction [4]; and finally, ileus is condition that can result in rapid death [3].

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**Fig. 1** Museum specimen: jar containing approximately five hundred cherry kernels removed from the distal part of large bowel during autopsy

It could be readily assumed that death was rapid for the case under consideration and presented here, since the patient had not undergone any surgical treatment: about 500 cherry pits in the distal section of the large bowel were found and removed during the autopsy, not during an actual

surgical procedure. Furthermore, the case was conducted by police investigation as being forensic, and therefore a forensic—and not clinical—autopsy was requested and performed (autopsy forensic case No. 167 in our archives for the year of 1930). It could be also presumed that physicians suspected some kind of poisoning, possibly due to the present abdominal symptoms. The forensic autopsy established the exact cause of death as being the mechanical obstruction of the large bowel by foreign bodies; namely, the great amount cherry pits that were gluttonously swallowed during the summer season.

Although over 80 years old, this case is still a conspicuous showpiece in the forensic museum collection, in that, this somewhat bizarre forensic case-story always occupies the attention of contemporary medical students during their visits to our museum.

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**Conflict of interest** The authors hereby declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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