

In coma, mother may face murder

Harry Harris and Laura Casey, STAFF WRITERS

OAKLAND – A woman who police said used a rite of suicide from her native China to take the life of her 3-month-old son Saturday and put herself in a coma could be charged with murder as early as today, police said. Regardless of Hui Zhu’s fate, what happened at her West Oakland house has shattered a family and left her husband and father of her only child inconsolable.

“He is really upset,” a relative of the couple said before asking reporters to leave their home.

The 42-year-old mother had a happy pregnancy and was looking forward to the birth of her first child, relatives told police.

But soon after her son, Jason Situ, was born June 8, she fell into what authorities believe was a classic case of postpartum depression.

She had made previous attempts to commit suicide, and her family was trying to get her treatment. But until Saturday she had not done anything to harm her infant son, officials said.

Police said that while her husband was at work, Zhu drew from her native China a form of self-inflicted death known as “burning the charcoal” in an effort to end her and her child’s lives.

She used tape and plastic to seal a bedroom of her West Oakland home, then put charcoal into a pot that was heated on a propane-powered portable stove while she lay next to her baby.

Charcoal burning became the third most-common suicide method in Hong Kong after a well-publicized death in 1998, according to the New Scientist magazine. By 2001, it had replaced hanging as the second most-common method of committing suicide in Hong Kong – accounting for 25 percent of all deaths.

Hong Kong is under the Chinese government’s control, and this method of suicide is becoming more common in China as well, New Scientist said.

When burned, charcoal produces carbon monoxide, a colorless, odorless gas that can accumulate to deadly levels indoors.

The toxic fumes killed Jason and left Zhu in a coma, police said.

Neighbors, some of whom ran to the couple’s aid when they saw Jason’s father outside screaming with his baby in hand, were still recovering from the terrifying scene Monday. One neighbor, who said he dragged Zhu out of the flat and tried to administer CPR, received private counseling Sunday night.

Betty Hong, executive director of Asian Community Mental Health Services in Oakland, said Asians are not at a higher risk than anyone else for postpartum depression or suicide.

“The issues with Asians and Pacific Islanders, as well as Latinos, I suppose, is often they have poverty issues, there is an issue of language, and there is an issue of isolation,” Hong said.

Asian Community Mental Health Services provides multilingual and multicultural family services in 14 Asian languages. Its staff attempts to help anyone who contacts them.

“It makes it hard for us to help when they don't come forward,” Hong said.

If Zhu survives, she faces murder charges that could be filed as early as today, authorities said.

Sgt. Harry Hu, who interpreted for homicide sergeants Brian Medeiros and Tony Jones, said Zhu and her husband were married in a southern province of the People's Republic of China in 1992.

They immigrated to Oakland about eight years ago, where he got work in construction and she was employed by an East Bay rubber stamp business, Hu said.

Correspondent Glen So contributed to this story.

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