



The Skeptics SA guide to Spontaneous Human Combustion

Spontaneous Human Combustion (SHC) is the process of a human body catching fire as a result of heat generated by internal chemical action.

Many people have felt as if they were about to explode, or that their bellies were on fire, but so far there are no accounts of anyone suddenly bursting into flames due to a case of spontaneous combustion originating within the body. It is true that many people have suddenly exploded or suddenly burst into flames, but these cases are all traceable to unfriendly fire from without. The very idea of a living animal, human or otherwise, igniting from spontaneous combustion in the belly or anywhere else in the body is ludicrous and preposterous. Perhaps that explains why stories of spontaneous human combustion abound in books about 'mysteries.'

To be fair to mystery lovers everywhere, it should be noted that spontaneous human combustion is almost exclusively reserved for corpses. Very few of the reports mention living persons as victims of such a wicked trick of nature.

One tale from the 17th century claims a German man self-ignited due to his having drunk a lot of brandy. My guess would be that if

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drinking a lot of brandy caused self-combustion, there would be a lot more cases to study than this isolated report from Germany. Skeptics do not think there are any good documented cases of SHC, though we admit that there are stories which claim that at least a couple hundred human beings or human corpses have spontaneously combusted. Many of the stories have been related by police investigators of corpses who have been perplexed by partially ignited bodies near unburnt rugs or furniture. 'What else could it be?' they ask. Indeed, what else? Well, how about self-ignition due to dropping a lit cigarette, or ignition due to another person putting the match to a person or place. Many of the allegedly spontaneously combusted corpses are of elderly people who may have been murdered and torched by their killers or who ignited themselves accidentally.

The physical possibilities of spontaneous human combustion are remote. Not only is the body mostly water, but aside from fat tissue and methane gas, there isn't much that burns readily in a human body.

To cremate a human body requires enormous amounts of heat over a long period of time. To get a chemical reaction in a human body which would lead to ignition would require some do-

ing. The ignition point of human fat might be low, but to get the fire going would probably require an external source. If the deceased had recently eaten an enormous amount of hay that was infested with bacteria, enough heat might be generated to ignite the hay, but not much besides the gut and intestines would probably burn. Or, if the deceased had been eating the newspaper and drunk some oil, and was left to rot for a couple of weeks in a well-heated room, his gut might ignite.

I imagine that the reason some of these burnt bodies appear so strange has more to do with the difficulty of burning a human corpse than with spontaneous combustion. That a fire should burn some things and not others, that it should appear to have started from inside the body, or that there be no other evidence of foul play besides a smoldering corpse, doesn't imply that the most reasonable explanation is spontaneous human combustion.

There may be many things we can't explain because we don't have enough information. In such cases, it does not seem beneficial to speculate unless there is some substance to our speculation. Has anyone tried to get a corpse to spontaneously combust? Are there any coroners out there who have seen this

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happen? If so, where are their reports? Is there a universal conspiracy of coroners to hide from the public this vital information! You'd think that if human corpses spontaneously combusted at least one coroner somewhere on the planet would have seen one. Why do corpses only spontaneously combust for police officers, especially British bobbys?

There are a few other curious things about SHC that should be considered. Fire burns at several hundred degrees Celsius. The human body, when alive, is usually about 37°C. A corpse would tend to cool off to room temperature. If a living being ever spontaneously combusted, the warning signs would be phenomenal: a 100°C burning sensation! If a corpse self-ignited it would be hard to keep it burning unless the room were very, very hot. In fact, the room would have to be nearly on fire itself to keep the corpse ignited. Once a fire has started, it will be self-supporting only if the temperature created by the combustion of the burning substance is as high or higher than its ignition point. A cool body in a cool room would be unlikely to do much more than smolder a little bit if it did self-ignite.

Nevertheless, we should not be scornful of those who fear that their fate might include SHC at some future date. I saw a hypnotherapist on TV the other night who could probably cure this phobia in 18 minutes or less. And for those cops who think SHC might be the best explanation for the next charred corpse they come upon, there are psychic detectives they can consult who will reveal the truth to them just by looking at a picture of the scene.

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People helping people: that's what pseudomysteries and psychics are for. Furthermore, I can attest that there was a time in my life when I thought for sure my gut was igniting and I was going to die from internal combustion. Telling me such a thing was impossible would have done no good to persuade me otherwise. All rational argument is lost on one in deep pain. I hallucinated and had visions of imploding blue flames. Fortunately, a surgeon removed my gall bladder and ever since I have noticed a decreased fear of SHC.

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