



Pathology Biology Section – 2003

G37 A Study of Three Suicidal Hangings in Jail Using Telephone Cords

Reade A. Quinton, MD*, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center Department of Pathology, 5323 Harry Hines Boulevard, Dallas, TX; David Dolinak, MD, Dallas County Medical Examiner, 5230 Medical Center Drive, Dallas, TX

The goal of this presentation is to present three cases of hanging suicides that occurred in custody, and the specific changes that were made to address the problem.

In a three month period of 2000, three suicide hanging deaths with telephone cords occurred in North Texas jails and were autopsied at the Southwestern Institute of Forensic Sciences in Dallas. The first incident was a 36 year-old woman who was arrested for outstanding traffic warrants. She had a history of depression, drug abuse, and prior arrests. On the day of her death, the decedent was discovered in a kneeling position by the pay telephone in the cell she occupied, hanging from the metal spiral telephone cord looped around her neck. She was the only occupant of the cell, which was under video surveillance. The telephone cord measured 15 and 3/4 inches in length.

The second case occurred ten days later in a different jail in an outlying county. A 24 year-old man had been arrested for a number of charges including assaulting a public servant. Because he was already on probation, these charges would mean his immediate return to prison. The decedent was found hanging from the metal phone cord attached to the pay phone in his holding cell. He was the sole occupant of the cell, which was not monitored by electronic surveillance. Investigation revealed that the man had phoned his wife to tell her he was going to commit suicide prior to the act. The telephone cord measured 19 inches in length.

One month later, a third incident occurred in another jail. A 29 yearold man had been arrested for disorderly conduct. At the time of arrest the man was under the influence of alcohol, but no other drug use was reported. He was the sole occupant of a holding cell that contained a mounted video camera. The camera was filming, but was not constantly monitored. A telephone was mounted on the wall just inside of the cell. A review of the video tape showed the decedent hanging himself with the telephone cord ten minutes after entering the cell; he was discovered approximately two hours later. According to his family, he had made two prior suicide attempts.

Autopsies were performed in each of these cases and showed typical ligature furrows without evidence of other trauma or neck injury. Blood toxicology studies were positive for methamphetamine, methadone, fluoxetine, and diazepam in the first case, a blood alcohol level of 0.12% in the second, and a blood alcohol level of 0.18% in the third.

Because of these types of incidents, solutions such as providing shortened receiver cords have been suggested. A cord-free inmate phone that has a recessed, cordless handle is also available. These phones can function similarly to a speaker-phone, but with the privacy of a telephone. Following the incidents described above, a proposal was made to the Texas Commission on Jail Standards (TCJS) to standardize the types of telephones used in detox and holding cells. The proposal did not pass at that time, and there are currently no plans to make changes on a state-wide level. The current Texas Administrative Code for the TCJS addresses inmate rights concerning telephone calls and the accessibility of telephones, but does not define a specific type of telephone to be made available. There are also no rules written regarding the placement of telephones within or around holding cells. It is currently up to the individual jails to decide what type of phones to provide and where to mount them.

The three jails above each responded to these incidents by changing their telephones. Two of the jails shortened their receiver cords to a total length of 6-8 inches. The telephones are otherwise unaltered, and are still in the same locations. The third jail replaced their entire phone with a cordless telephone. These three incidents highlight the need to provide telephones that, if placed within holding cells or other jail cells, do not provide a possible means of suicide.

Hanging, Suicide, Custody