



G53 Suicide Attempt Using a Self-Made Rifle

Jean-Sebastien Raul, MD, Antoine Tracqui, MD, PhD, and Bertrand Ludes, MD, PhD, Institut de Medecine Legale, 11 rue Humann, Strasbourg, France*

The literature reports mainly the use of self-made guns but more seldom the use of self-made rifles. As a contribution to the understanding of this unusual firearm, the author presents a case involving a suicidal gunshot wound to the head from a self-made rifle that fortunately did not result in the death of the victim.

The use of self-made guns is quite unusual because of the general public's ready access to professionally manufactured handguns or rifles, especially in the U.S. In France, the policy is very different and it is difficult to purchase a handgun or even a rifle for hunting purpose. Nevertheless, the use of self-made guns is rare in France and the experience of pathologists with firearm injuries caused by such guns is fairly limited. The literature reports mainly the use of self-made guns but more seldom the use of self-made rifles. As a contribution to the understanding of this unusual firearm, the authors present a case involving a suicidal gunshot wound to the head from a self-made rifle that fortunately did not result in the death of the victim.

A 34-year-old, depressed man with medical history of suicide attempts was discovered in his bedroom with a rifle near him. Still alive, he was rapidly carried by helicopter to the hospital of Strasbourg and underwent cerebral CT-scan examination and skull radiography. The local prosecutor requested the authors examine the victim.

The victim was examined in the emergency unit. He was maintained artificially unconscious. Skin examination showed a mediofrontal contact gunshot wound located 10 cm above the glabella. No exit wounds were seen. The CT scan showed a right subdural hematoma and a fragmentation of the bullet through the entire right hemisphere. A major element of the bullet was found in contact with the right occipital lobe, under the skull. Skull X-Ray showed the fragmentation of the bullet following a horizontal direction. The direction of the bullet was from front to back, slightly from left to right, and quite horizontally. The maximum distance between the frontal wound and the right or left second finger was 76 cm. The victim was known to be right handed.

The prosecutor informed examining physicians that the distance between the muzzle of the rifle and the trigger was of 84 cm. This was inconsistent with a suicide. Therefore a decision was made to review the scene and rifle.

The rifle was a self-made weapon with a broken trigger, and the only manufactured part was the barrel. The needle was broken and the butt was missing. A striker had been made with a plain pipe sliding within a boiler tube. The posterior part of the plain tube was pointed. On the scene ground and the walls were examined for a crack. A 12 cm vertical recent crack was found on a wall, starting 173 cm from the ground. The victim was 176 cm tall. He had certainly put the muzzle of the rifle on his forehead and fired the weapon by hitting the wall with the posterior part of the rifle. This could explain the direction of the bullet within the skull and the location of the entrance wound. This could also explain how the rifle had been fired making any consideration regarding the distance between the trigger and the muzzle irrelevant.

Epilogue: the victim survived with a left hemiplegia, and confirmed a few months later exactly what the authors had supposed on the scene.

Self-made Rifle, Suicide, Zip Gun