



Pathology & Biology Section – 2005

G76 Suicide or Homicide - The Importance of Forensic Evidence: A Case Study

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Participants will develop a better understanding of the role and the importance of correlating autopsy findings and evidence from scene examination defining the manner of death.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating the difficulties in defining a suicide case that may be considered unusual with respect to evidence recovered from the death scene, the background of the deceased, and the connection of the suicide to an earlier murder.

Traditionally, the most common method of committing suicide by women is via drug overdose. Some statistical reports indicate that since the mid 1980s there has been a significant increase in the number of female suicides involving the use of a firearm. The most common wound site reported in such suicides is the head, and the handgun is the most common weapon utilized by women to commit suicide. Investigation of suicides in most instances tends to be straightforward, however there are some suicides which are very problematic. The determination of the cause and manner of death requires proper evaluation of the autopsy findings, in addition to various findings relating to the scene examination. In suicides, the type of weapon used and the existence of a motive or intent are crucial in the reconstruction of events leading to death. The following report describes a suicide case that may be considered unusual with respect to evidence recovered from the death scene, the background of the deceased, and the connection of the suicide to an earlier murder. In the early morning of January 17, 2004, the local police in Bari, Italy were alerted to the death of a 24-year-old female, by a young man who was fully clothed, with the exception of his pants. The young man informed police that he had witnessed a suicide of a woman whose body was located under a local bridge, a short distance from the police station. Inspection of the death scene by police revealed the young woman to be lying on the ground next to the open door of her automobile. The deceased, who was wearing a very broad rimmed hat, exhibited a single gunshot wound to the front of the head. A small handgun was recovered next to the deceased by the police. While being interviewed at the scene, the informant told police that young woman was his secret mistress, and that he had received numerous calls the previous evening from the woman. During the telephone conversations the male informant noted that the young woman was very distraught, and insisted that they meet beneath the bridge. Upon arriving beneath the bridge, the informant approached the woman as she was ranting about their past, at which point she placed a handgun against the top of her head and pulled the trigger. The informant at this point ran to the woman, then held her in a desperate attempt to revive her.

Examination of the car of the deceased by police led to the recovery of a short note which had been written by the woman, and which stated that she wished she could have prevented the murder of her mother. After a short examination of the scene, the police became very suspicious of the informant and arrested him in connection with the death of the woman. Further investigation of the suspect revealed that he had recently received several very expensive gifts from the father of the deceased, who was unaware that the suspect was married. Unknown to the Italian authorities at the time of the suspect's arrest, the German Police had an arrest warrant out for the young woman and her boyfriend. Two years prior, the deceased and her boyfriend murdered her mother in Germany. The mother had been bludgeoned, then run over with a motor vehicle to make it appear as if the death was an automobile accident.

The crime scene investigation reported that the body of the deceased was located next to the open door of her BMW. She was in a seated position on the pavement, with legs flexed, and her head and shoulders positioned back in the space between the opened door and the driver's seat. Her clothes exhibited no evidence of tears or rearrangement, with the exception of her hat which exhibited a circular defect in the front with traces of blood. Located next to the right hand of the deceased was a Baby – Browning .25 caliber handgun, model 1932. An empty shell casing of the same caliber was recovered from beneath the body of the deceased. The postmortem condition of the deceased as reported by the medical examiner at the scene noted a core body temperature of approximately 28° Celsius, minimal lividity changes and relatively little evidence of rigor. Inspection of the car revealed many items of value including jewellery, cash, and an airline ticket for a flight to Paris that was scheduled the same day as the death. The autopsy confirmed that the muzzle of the handgun was against the brim of the hat worn by the deceased when it was discharged. Soot, primer residue, and spent gunpowder particles were observed in and around the circular defect site on the hat. Analysis for primer residues were found to be positive on each hand of the victim, in particular on the external metacarpal surface between the first and second digits. A metal jacketed .25 caliber bullet was recovered from within the skull. Considering the cerebral lesions, it was evident that the bullet had passed through the frontal bone and the right frontal lobe, before crossing the



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midbrain and ending up in the left cerebellar lobe. Toxicological analysis was negative; however, sperm was identified from the anus of the deceased. DNA analysis of the sperm found it not to match the DNA profile of the suspect. Ballistic examination of the recovered bullet and cartridge revealed them to have been fired by the .25 caliber Baby – Browning recovered next to the deceased. One point of debate in the investigation was the possibility of positioning of the handgun by the deceased to commit suicide. The Baby – Browning, model 1932, possesses a three-stage safety system to avoid accidental discharge: it cannot be discharged with the magazine removed, even if a cartridge has been loaded. A manual safety is located on the left side of the weapon, along with a secondary safety which is located on the grip which blocks the trigger except when the pistol is held firmly in the hand, ready for shooting. Latent fingerprints on the handgun were identified as belonging to the deceased. The autopsy and ballistic findings strongly supported the notion that the deceased had fired the weapon. A reconstruction of the incident revealed that the woman held the handgun with both hands, with her finger wrapped around the back of the butt, and that she utilized her thumb to depress the trigger. The small amount of gunshot residue detected on the clothing of the suspect boyfriend was attributed to contamination while holding the deceased after the discharge of the weapon. The combined findings of the forensic investigation convinced prosecutors and police to reconsider the manner of death as a suicide. The complete details of this investigation will be presented.

Criminalistics, Handguns, Suicide