



Pathology Biology Section – 2006

G84 Suicidal Hangings: A Growing Trend in Northern Virginia

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The goal of this presentation is to identify trends present in suicidal hangings.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by providing information on the findings associated with suicidal hangings with emphasis on injuries to the neck, ligature device, presence of a suicide note, and history of mental illness/life event.

Introduction: Suicide is one of the most important public health issues in the United States. Suicide represents the eleventh leading cause of death in the United States. Nearly 20% of the caseload of the Northern Virginia Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Fairfax, Virginia is suicide. Suicide rates for this country have been relatively stable over the past decade with approximately 10 suicide deaths per 100,000 people. The most common method of suicide in the United States for both males and females is the use of a firearm. The second most common method of suicide in males is hanging.

Materials and Methods: This is a retrospective review of case files from the Northern Virginia Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Fairfax, Virginia. Inclusionary data for this pilot study included the cause of death from hanging and the manner of death ruled as suicide for autopsy cases from the years 2003 thru 2004. A total of 320 suicides were autopsied during this 2-year study period. Of these 320 suicides, 52 (16%) were due to hanging. These 52 cases were reviewed for the following information: injuries to the neck, type of ligature device, history of mental illness/life event, the presence of alcohol, the presence of a suicide note, past ideations/attempts, and the demographics of the decedent. The case information was organized into a spreadsheet and the data was analyzed for any trends or interesting correlations.

Results: Between the years 2003 and 2004, the Northern Virginia Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Fairfax, Virginia investigated 320 suicides. Of these 320 suicides, 52 (16%) were reported as hanging. Males comprised 81% (42), while females accounted for the remaining 19% (10) of all suicidal hangings. Caucasians accounted for 71% (37) of the cases, followed by Asians with 13% (7). Case files will be reviewed for a history of depression, mental illness, or life event, and past suicide attempt(s). The presence of alcohol and/or suicide note will be reported.

Conclusions: This pilot study emphasized the increasing rate of suicidal hangings in Northern Virginia. Sixteen percent of the suicides in Northern Virginia are due to hanging. In 2003, 20 individuals died as the result of suicidal hanging. The rate of suicidal hangings increased to a total of 32 cases in the year 2004 and the rate continued to rise in the first half of 2005. This study will report the correlation between type of ligature used and pathologic trauma to the neck. A history of depression, mental illness, or life event, and/or past suicide attempt(s) by the decedent will be analyzed, and the presence of alcohol and/or suicide note will be reported.

Suicide, Hanging, Ligature