



## Pathology Biology Section – 2007

### G10 Checking In to Check Out: The New Mexico Experience of Suicide Occurring in Hotels

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have an awareness of features of hotel facilities, which may attract individuals contemplating suicide and the characteristic findings of the population that complete the act in this setting.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by delineating findings and behavior, which may assist in the determination of manner of death as suicide occurring in a hotel as well as facilitate discussion with the family under these circumstances. Possible points of intervention by hotel personnel are examined. Safety issues in the hospitality industry are underscored.

Hotels offer many advantages to the individual contemplating suicide, including but not limited to, privacy, an expected guarantee of timely discovery which will not traumatize loved ones, a place to stay when one has traveled to avoid recognition in their own community, sanctuary, a place to act out, neutral ground during disputes, or simply a high building with access to the roof. For others, it may be the end of a long road trip during which suicide was contemplated. Perhaps the sterility and depersonalized setting appeals to those with depression. All cases in New Mexico certified as suicide where the death occurred in a hotel setting or equivalent between 1995 and 2005 were reviewed for demographics and unique features (N=74, 2% of suicides certified in the State in this time frame).

This setting is preferred by White (73%) males (74%) between the ages of 30 and 50 (69%).

Firearm injuries are the method of choice in 42% of cases; no firearm suicides were immediately discovered because of the sound of the discharge of the weapon.

Drug intoxications accounted for 22% of the deaths; 22% of the non-illicit drug intoxications had detectable antiemetic substances. Although *Final Exit* recommends the use of an antiemetic in cases of contemplated overdose, it is also recommended that when death occurs in a hotel, a note of apology to the staff and a large tip be left. Neither of these was present in any of the cases.

There were a surprising number of somewhat unusual deaths, including cyanide poisoning, a stab wound of the leg (in a paraplegic individual), cold exposure, helium inhalation, jumping from a height (through a skylight into the lobby), and self-immolation.

Notes were present in 30% of cases and 18% of cases were considered to be highly organized (photographs, wills, insurance policies, "do-not-resuscitate" statements, Hemlock Society membership, religious material, etc.). Suicide in a hotel would seem to require at least some degree of planning and organization. Of the six deaths due to incised wounds, only one employed a weapon at hand (broken bottle). Of the five hangings, only two individuals brought a ligature to the scene; the remainder used linens or clothes hangers, items likely to be found in a hotel setting. In nine cases, there was multiple occupancy of the hotel room, although most of these were not witnessed.

The suicide notes in two cases indicated that the decedents had an advanced malignancy. At autopsy, neither case had an identifiable neoplasm. It is not known if this was a sincere belief on the part of the decedent or an attempt to console the family.

Cocaine was present in 12% of cases and was related to the cause of death in only one. It was by far the most common drug of abuse detected. Alcohol was present in 38% of cases, with 18% of these less than 0.04 mg/dL (possible bracing effect) and 36% greater than 0.2 mg/dL. It appears that when alcohol is consumed in this setting, the blood concentration is likely to be high. In three cases where death was attributed to illicit drug intoxication, all had suicide notes.

Decedents resided out of state in 28% of cases, almost half of these in states adjacent to New Mexico. Over half of the cases resided less than 100 miles from the scene, with 22% less than ten miles. It is possible that a polite question or inquiry by registering personnel regarding nearby residence may be a point of intervention.

There should be concern for the safety and welfare of personnel in the hospitality industry as these cases included physical domestic violence (x3), violent felons (x2), law enforcement stand-offs (x2), shooting outside the hotel room (x2) and a prison escapee. The case of self-immolation in particular could have caused a large-scale tragedy.

**Suicide, Hotel, New Mexico**