



Pathology Biology Section – 2007

G24 Female Firearm-Related Suicides: A Reappraisal

Kevin D. Whaley, MD, Anna Noller, PhD, and William T. Gormley, MD, PhD, Central District, Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, Commonwealth of Virginia, 400 East Jackson Street, Richmond, VA 23219*

After attending this presentation, attendees will recognize that suicides by women using firearms, including shotguns are not rare and may be increasing in incidence.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating the increasing incidence of self-inflicted gunshot and shotgun wounds by women.

After attending this presentation, attendees will appreciate the increasing incidence of female firearm-related suicide. Moreover, they will become familiar with the most common risk factors associated with these cases.

When women die from apparently self-inflicted firearm wounds, especially shotgun wounds, many citizens, family members, and death investigators are very suspicious that the death is really a homicide. This presentation will impact the forensic community, particularly forensic pathologists, and medicolegal death investigators, by facilitating accurate and efficient determination of the manner of death in female firearm-related suicides. Furthermore, proper classification of these deaths as suicides will also result in a more efficient expenditure of time and other resources with regards to law enforcement and the judicial system.

Notwithstanding increasing data to the contrary, female suicides are often stereotypically associated with less violent means (i.e., poisoning, hanging, carbon monoxide) while their male counterparts are stereotypically associated with more destructive means (i.e., firearms, jumping from heights, motor vehicle accidents).

Despite being historically associated with male suicide, a retrospective review of female suicides occurring in Virginia from 2000 – 2005 revealed a significant percentage of female decedents utilized a firearm. This study reviewed the case files of all female firearm-related suicides from 2000 to 2005 at the Richmond District Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Additional data was gathered from the other three districts with regards to the incidence female firearm-related over this five year period. Data collected from each case included the age, race, comorbidities, socioeconomic status, and substance abuse history, type of firearm utilized, firearm availability, and whether or not other methods of self-destruction accompanied the firearm injury. The demographics and risk factors associated with female firearm-related suicides differ from those associated with their male counterparts. Appreciating these differences will facilitate accurate and efficient medicolegal death investigation of female suicides involving a firearm.

Of particular concern is a gradual increase in the incidence of firearm-related female suicides annually. In Virginia, the incidence of firearm-related female suicides has increased by approximately ten percent over a four-year period. Moreover, of firearm-related female suicides, a significant percentage involves a shotgun rather than a handgun or rifle.

The presentation will include case examples that illustrate the most common scenarios involving female firearm-related suicide.

Shotgun, Suicide, Women