



### D4 Female Suicide Victims From Gunshot Wounds to the Head: Investigatory Considerations

Alan Price, MA\*, Southern Institute of Forensic Science, Regional Field Service Office, PO Box 336433, Greeley, CO 80633

The goal of this presentation is to provide eight (8) investigative steps for evaluating females who are shot in the head and determining that their manner of death is unequivocally a suicide.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating investigatory considerations when investigating suspected female suicides by gunshot to the head.

This presentation focuses on investigative strategies for examining cases where female victims are found with a gunshot to the head and suicide is considered the manner of death. Families of female victims who commit suicide in this manner have more difficulty accepting this as a cause of death than others. Investigation of female victims who have sustained a gunshot to the head should be approached with extreme vigilance and an aura of suspicion.

Data collected from the Center for Disease Control and the National Center for Health reflects that the number of suicides has remained relatively consistent from 1990 thru 2004. Groups that collect and analyze suicide statistics identify data as to the means of suicide, i.e., firearms, poisoning hanging, etc., however, they do not specifically indicate the location of the fatal wound. Even though the method of suicide for women vary, gunshots are not the most common method, yet it is not an uncommon method. Suicide by women shooting themselves in the head does occur, however, even though rare, this is seen. This presentation proposes eight investigatory procedures which should be considered in documenting these cases as suicide and not a homicide.

1. **Position of victim:** If the victim is evaluated by emergency responders, and it is determined that she is deceased, every effort should be made to leave the victim in the position in which she is discovered until documentary photographs are taken. This initial step can save investigators literally hours of investigative reconstruction.
2. **Bloodstain patterns on hands:** Victims that succumb to self-inflicted gunshot wounds to the head are likely to have either high or medium back spatter on their hands. This can be photographed and preserved by placing paper bags over the victim's hands prior to transportation from the scene.
3. **Gunshot Residue collection:** Again by placing paper bags on the victim's hands, the death investigator is minimizing the possible loss or contamination of gunshot residue. This step should be initiated as soon as possible and before the victim is transported from the death scene. The paper bags should be retained as evidence and entered into a chain of custody for later examination of trace evidence.
4. **Examination of the gunshot wound:** Careful consideration and examination should be given to the victim's gunshot wound prior to autopsy prepping. Checking the gunshot wound for muzzle impressions, searing, and/or the presence of stippling can later be used to determine distance from the entry wound to the weapon's muzzle. Pre-autopsy examination can also support the medical examiner's findings. High quality photography is imperative to document the presence or lack of searing, soot and stippling.
5. **Radiograph of victim's skull:** Radiographs of the victim's skull are imperative. These x-rays may identify the location of the bullet and any trauma that is associated with the gunshot wound itself.
6. **Complete examination of the victim's "home environment":** This investigation activity is likely to require a family members consent or a warrant from a court describing that additional investigation is need to positively establish the manner of death. Since many suicides are committed in settings away from home, frequently preparatory activities take place at a different location than where the victim actually commits suicide. These activities include acts such as computer entries on the topic of suicide, receipts for purchasing the firearm, suicide notes, or instructions to be implemented after the victim's death.
7. **Comprehensive psychosocial autopsy:** Suicide literature contains many components that should be considered in a psychological autopsy. Investigators should not only examine the victim's mental state preceding death, i.e. depression, but the social circumstances that contribute to their mental state. The death investigator should look for 'landmarks' such as the 'anniversary dates' of the death of a loved one, divorce, the diagnosis of a terminal illness or changes in the victim's financial circumstances. A comprehensive psychosocial autopsy can answer many of the families' questions, and make the death determination an unequivocal suicide.
8. **Firearm examination:** In many jurisdictions law enforcement responding to a suicide will take responsibility for entering the weapon used in the death into the chain of custody. Who examines the firearm and how the weapon is analyzed varies considerably. Some forensic laboratories will not examine weapons used in a suicide, because suicide is not classified as a crime in that State. Ballistic comparison can also be conducted to compare a bullet from the victim or the death scene with the gun used in the death.

These guidelines are proposed when females are discovered with gunshots to their head and that the comprehensive investigation differentiates suicide from homicide. Victim's families have difficulty accepting this manner of death when the victim is shot in the head. These procedural guidelines help assure families that every



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investigative avenue was explored before concluding that this act was in fact a suicide and not a homicide.

**Female Suicides, Head Gunshots, Investigative Procedures**