



## Pathology & Biology Section – 2008

### **G2 Unusual Gunshot Wound Death of a Sex Offender on the Way to Jail in the World of CSI**

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn to assess an unusual case where the evidence at the scene makes it difficult for the medical examiner to decide homicide, suicide or accident and to evaluate peculiar scene circumstances involving ballistic evidence.

The presentation will impact the forensic community by showing how important it is to look at all the evidence at a scene and at an autopsy before making a decision about the manner of death.

A 36-year-old man was dropped off by his wife at a bus stop. He was taking the bus to jail for a nine year sentence in a juvenile sex offender case. He was found two days later on the back road of a rural area. He was sitting in the driver seat of the family car that had been in storage, suffering from a gunshot wound to the leg. He had a tourniquet tied around the injured leg. He had been dead for an unknown period of time and had started to decompose in the summer heat.

Crime technicians noted an unusual finding. Although there were no bullet holes through the car, there was a handgun on the ground outside the driver's door. There was a wooden dowel taped to the barrel of the gun, and a nylon string was tied to the trigger guard of the gun with the other end tied to the steering wheel. Lastly, there was an athletic sock covering the handle of the gun.

The autopsy was routine. The deceased was a healthy man, in the early stages of decomposition. There was a gunshot wound to the right thigh that entered the anterior medial thigh and exited the posterior medial thigh. Dissection revealed that the bullet transected both the femoral artery and vein. The cause of death was exsanguination from a gunshot wound to the leg.

The manner of death was less clear. What was the reason for the wooden dowel and the gun with the sock over the grip? There are several scenarios possible. The first scenario is that the man was attempting suicide because of his conviction and because his relationship with his wife was troubled, but did not want his death to look like a suicide. He used the sock to hide fingerprints and had the dowel taped to the gun so that he could hold the gun far enough away to look like a distant shot. Since he was holding the gun by the taped dowel he needed the string to pull the trigger and then he may have intended to jettison the gun, string, and dowel before dying. He successfully shot himself in the leg, but died in the driver seat of the car before he could get rid of the evidence.

The second scenario is an attempt to look like a holdup or an assault. The individual again knows about fingerprints, gunshot residue and range of fire determination. He rigged the gun to pull the trigger and shoot himself in an attempt to look like someone else shot him. Perhaps he wanted to go to the hospital and delay the start of his jail sentence or obtain sympathy from his wife. But he shot himself in the wrong area of the thigh and although he put a tourniquet on the leg, he bled to death before he could get help.

The third scenario is an accident. Perhaps he was doing something with the string and the dowel that could never be understood, unless the victim himself explained it, and he was accidentally shot. He lost too much blood to drive himself to get help, and he died at the scene.

Questions remain unanswered as to what his motive was. Also, why was the string tied to the steering wheel? Did he use some of the string to make a tourniquet and tie the end of the string to the steering wheel just to prevent the string from blowing away? Why wasn't he able to get help in time? Why was he in this rural area? It is also unclear where he acquired his knowledge of ballistics, but the complex scenario suggests familiarity with the world of CSI.

These are questions that may never have a final answer. But this is a good example of the need for thorough scene examination, background investigation, and straightforward autopsy technique. This presentation will discuss the evidence for each manner of death in this unusual gunshot wound case.

#### **Range of Fire, Ballistics, Unusual Death Scene**