



Pathology & Biology Section – 2008

G59 Suicidal Shotgun Wound Using a Shotgun Barrel, a Shotgun Shell, and a BB

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After viewing this presentations individuals will be better able to recognize unusual patterns of suicide. These patterns include: homemade or improvised firearms, unusual firing positions, and disguise of the suicide as a murder.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing another unusual example of the use of a firearm for suicidal purposes. It also stresses the importance of good investigative technique as well as maintaining an open mind throughout the duration of an investigation.

Suicidal gunshot wounds are common in the United States. Many of these cases involve handguns; however, the use of long guns such as rifles or shotguns is also prevalent. Occasionally, an individual will employ the use of a homemade firearm or 'zip gun'. Creative or elaborate mechanisms for pulling the trigger are sometimes devised. Some individuals go to great lengths to conceal the weapon, confusing the issue and making the suicide appear as a homicide. In this report, we describe an unusual suicidal shotgun wound, in which the victim used a shotgun barrel (without the rest of the gun), a shotgun shell, and a BB.

A 54-year-old man was found dead in the basement of his home by friends who were helping him move out of his home. He was lying on the concrete floor with an obvious wound to his lower left chest. Emergency medical personnel responded, as did police. He was pronounced dead at the scene. The coroner was notified. The police and coroner believed that the chest wound was the probable cause of death, and their initial impression was that it represented some sort of impaling wound. The basement was relatively empty, as the man and his friends had been moving his belongings out of the home. An old shotgun barrel was seen lying on the floor near the body, but it was not initially considered significant. Examination of the body at autopsy revealed the true nature of the wound: a non-contact shotgun wound with wad-petal abrasions and stippling. Close inspection of the shotgun barrel and scene disclosed a spent shotgun shell within the barrel, multiple small indentations on the base of the shell, including one on the primer, and a BB pellet on the floor near where the man and the shotgun barrel were discovered. It was surmised that the man, while bending at the waist and leaning over, held the barrel in a vertical position, with the muzzle end directed upward toward his chest and the opposite end, containing a loaded shell, toward the floor. By slamming the base of the shotgun shell on a BB on the floor, the man eventually hit the BB with the primer, causing the weapon to discharge.

The present case serves to remind death investigators of the importance of a thorough scene investigation as well as the importance of maintaining an open mind regarding the cause and manner of death. In this case, the initial concern was for a homicide with an impaling wound. Autopsy and subsequent investigation revealed the truth—a suicide employing a shotgun fired in a very unique manner. The case provides another example of how suicidal individuals can be very creative when it comes to discharging a weapon.

Suicide, Shotgun, Barrel