



Pathology & Biology Section – 2008

G60 Characteristics of Suicidal Gunshot Wounds to the Mouth in Women

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After attending this presentation, attendees will become familiar with the characteristics of suicidal gunshot wounds to the mouth in women, particularly relating to the circumstances in which the decedent shot herself.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by drawing attention to an unusual case and reviewing factors which may be used to distinguish homicide from suicide in female victims of oral gunshot wounds.

In 2003, an unusual case occurred in which the decedent, a 40-year-old woman, sustained a gunshot wound of the mouth in another person's residence, and in his presence. Her skirt had been removed and folded in her purse, and the crowns of her central incisors were chipped. An important forensic issue in this case was whether the mode of death was homicide or suicide.

In calendar years 2004-2006, the Los Angeles County Department of Coroner examined 755 victims of suicidal gunshot wounds. Of these, 80 (11%) were female. Of the female victims, 72 (90%) used handguns and 8 (10%) used rifles or shotguns.

The gunshot entry wound was located in the mouth in 24 individuals. The ages of these 24 victims ranged from 34 to 90. A suicide note or equivalent (telephone call, estate documents left out) was present in 14 cases (58%).

In virtually every case, the decedent was fully clothed (23/23 cases; one case where amount of clothing was unknown) and the gunshot wound was inflicted at the decedent's home (21/24 cases, 88%). The shooting was unwitnessed in 22 cases (92%).

In 20 cases, the decedent did not sustain chip fractures of the tips of the incisors by x-ray. In two cases the decedent was edentulous, and in two cases the presence of fractures could not be ascertained because of extensive destruction of the mouth by the firearm wound.

The caliber of the gun varied widely. There were two injuries with .22 caliber weapons, one with a .25 caliber weapon, one with a .32 caliber weapon, three with 9 mm weapons, five with .357 caliber weapons, nine with .38 caliber weapons, and one with a .45 caliber weapon. One decedent used a 12 gauge shotgun, and one used a 20 gauge shotgun.

Suicidal gunshot wounds of the mouth are unusual in women, occurring in 24/755 of our suicidal gunshot wounds in this series (3%). In the large majority of cases, the female victims of suicidal gunshot wounds to the mouth were fully clothed and committed suicide unobserved in their own residences. Chip fractures of the tips of the incisors were not seen in our cases. Most victims in this case used handguns rather than rifles or shotguns. On the other hand, presence of a suicide note and caliber of the gun were not distinctive features of this group of cases.

In determining the mode of death in a gunshot wound of the mouth in a female victim, it may be valuable to note the circumstances in which the injury occurred; particularly whether the decedent was clothed, whether the injury was observed, and whether the decedent was in her own residence.

Gunshot Wound, Suicide, Female