



### F21 Bite Marks, Bullets, and a Homicide in Reno

*Norman D. Sperber, DDS\*, 6237 Caminito Telmo, San Diego, CA 92111*

After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to recognize good bite mark patterns. This presentation led to the conviction of an individual – minutes before the expert was to testify.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by illustrating the steps involved in courtroom preparation. Although the maxillary arch was not as easy to visualize as the mandibular arch, the similarity in both mandibular bite marks was striking. The defense attorney was shown the three exhibits just before the expert testified.

On September 2, 2006, the Reno (Nevada) Police Department responded to a call at a single-family residence. At 6:15 a.m., a medical aid limited search of the home by investigators revealed a victim inside her residence lying on the floor next to a bed, fully clothed. The residence entry area, living room, kitchen, and master bedroom, where the victim lay, were strewn with broken and bloody items, which included clothing, lampshade, table, and a drinking glass. A .357 magnum revolver with expended casings inside was found on the hallway floor adjoining the master bedroom. Moments before, a defendant left the residence peacefully into Reno Police Department custody, following an hour-long negotiation. Prior to these events, the victim was last seen in Carson City alone at 2:00 a.m. The suspect, a musician, was last seen in a dance hall, alone, at 1:30 a.m. The victim, a professional singer, performed in Reno, Lake Tahoe, and the San Francisco Bay area. Both the victim and the suspect shared the four-bedroom home. The defendant was known to have a video camera while living at the victim's residence. His video camera was found positioned on a couch arm facing the master bedroom about five feet away with a blue sheer cloth hanging from the ceiling. The camera view screen was activated and on when discovered. A household-gauge electrical extension cord extended from an adjoining bedroom about eight feet from the video camera. A notebook journal on the kitchen table had handwritten entries, an excerpt which reads, "There are things you want, including sexually, that I am flat out not willing to give at this time and I'm uncomfortable living in a situation with that hanging over me." Next to his journal was a note written by the defendant reading "I'm Sorry." The other journal entry excerpts read, "Life is more difficult with you living here." "I'm lying here shaking again. You're upset. I'm upset. This is not a good situation. At some point in almost every day, I'm paralyzed-afraid to do what I need to do for fear of upsetting you or upsetting the balance", and "If we'd spent ½ the time rehearsing that we do fighting, we'd have a night's worth of music."

The victim's autopsy revealed three gunshot wounds to her skull, multiple bruises, and abrasions on her face, torso, and extremities. Photographs of these injuries were provided by the Washoe County Sheriff's Forensic Science Division. The photographs revealed most of the above noted injuries including two human bite marks behind the right shoulder and back. In addition, there was an injury to one breast, which authorities believed could have been a bite mark. It was concluded that the mark on the breast was not a bite mark, so the investigation was limited to the two bite marks on the posterior portion of the victim's body.

The following report was forwarded to Washoe County Deputy District Attorney Bruce Hahn regarding the bite marks: "I have received a number of color photographs as well as a CD from the Reno Police Department and the Washoe County Sheriff of the victim in this case. Specifically, I was asked to determine if bruised lesions on the left breast, right shoulder, and back of the victim were human bites or not. I also received dental models of Mr. Pullin. I do not believe that the breast injury is a human bite. There are no arches (lineup of the teeth) or anything that resembles the incisal edges of the anterior teeth. Therefore, I will discuss the lesions found on the right back and right shoulder.

**Right Shoulder:** This lesion is a human bite mark and it reveals six maxillary (upper) teeth and seven mandibular (lower) teeth.

This bite itself is not ideal, because many of the marks are distorted and do not show the details of some teeth. The suspect has a very unusual alignment of especially the lower teeth. Although the tooth marks in the skin are fuzzy, it is still possible to visualize the lower teeth alignment. The same is true of the upper teeth. In this case, the unusual position of his upper teeth can be seen in the photographs. Therefore, it is highly probable that Mr. Pullin's teeth caused this bite.

**Right Back:** In this bite the same discussion applies to the quality of the bite. The lower teeth especially can be visualized in the bite mark. The upper teeth are not visualized as well as the shoulder bite. In fact, the central incisors hardly mark at all on the skin and the right side of the bite mark has three or four teeth that are conjoined. It is not unusual for the lower teeth to mark much better than the upper teeth. Thus, although it is difficult to visualize the upper teeth in this right back area, this fact is more than offset by the obvious relation of the lower teeth to the skin. Therefore, it is highly probable that the suspect is responsible for this bite mark as well. The rating system I use is as follows: (1) inconsistent, (2) consistent, (3) probable, (4) reasonable dental certainty. If the bite marks were more distinct, I would have used the term reasonable dental certainty. However, I have only used that term three times, due to the fact that the skin is not an ideal impression medium." The comparisons were made using tracings both electronically produced and by various hand-drawn methods.



## Odontology Section – 2009

---

These tracings were almost identical. This presentation will demonstrate the photographic images and the unusual alignment of the suspect's lower anterior (front) teeth.

Just before the odontologist was about to testify in the afternoon, the "defendant simply plead straight up to the charge on file," said the Deputy District Attorney. Pullin, the defendant, faces a maximum sentence of life without parole, and another life sentence for the use of a deadly weapon.

### **Bite Marks, Pleading Out, Preparation**