



Pathology Biology Section – 2009

G103 Unusual Methods of Suicide in Chicago, Illinois, Cook County

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about some unusual methods of suicide recently observed in Chicago, IL during the first half of 2008. This paper is being introduced during a time of economic strain within the United States.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by making attendees aware of the unusual methods of suicide are being observed in Chicago, IL.

In 2004, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), suicide was the eleventh (11th) leading cause of death in the United States, accounting for 32,439 deaths. The major risk factors for the commission of suicide are well known and include a history of depression, substance abuse, stressful life events, family history of suicide, and prior suicide attempt. Males are four times (4X) more likely to commit suicide compared to females. Recent research has suggested the risk of suicide may be the result of an imbalance of neurotransmitters in the brain, thus emphasizing the importance of diagnosis and the role of antidepressants in the treatment of depression.

Firearms, suffocation, and poisoning were the most common methods chosen by individuals to commit suicide, although the methods differed between the sexes. Males tend to commit suicide using firearms, whereas females commit suicide by poisons. Non-Hispanic whites commit suicide at the highest rate. Although some data is similar to that published by the NIH, the authors will introduce a total of eight individuals who committed suicide by unusual methods rarely seen in a major metropolitan area.

One case involves a white male with multiple shotgun wounds who was found in his secure residence. The second case involves a white male inflicting sharp force injury to his dialysis catheter causing exsanguination and air embolism. Two cases, a white male and white female, involved the “death by Hibachi” method, which is accomplished by carbon monoxide intoxication from burning charcoal in an enclosed environment. At autopsy, both cases revealed bright cherry-red lividity and the carbon monoxide level ranged from 54%-80% saturation. One case involved a white female chemistry student who ingested acetylferrocene, an orange crystalline powder that is extremely toxic once ingested, and who died of liver failure. One case involved a white male hanged with simultaneous electrocution from a manmade apparatus. One case involved a white male who used ligature strangulation as a means of suicide. Finally, the last case involving a white male is noteworthy and unusual in the sense that the commission of suicide was performed with the production of hydrogen sulfide gas. This is a most unusual case of suicide from medical examiners office but deserves mention as this method is becoming increasingly popular overseas.

Suicide notes were left at the scene in only three cases, a similar frequency seen in prior reports. Two detailed suicide notes were recovered from individuals performing the “death by Hibachi” method. The third suicide note was recovered from the male inflicting sharp force injury to his dialysis catheter.

With the introduction of the internet, old as well as new and more unusual methods of committing suicide are available to the population. As seen in this research, the “death by Hibachi” method would take time to plan and execute (i.e., spending time on the internet, buying and burning the charcoal, taping the doors in the room and writing detailed suicide notes).

All cases involved non-Hispanic white individuals, similar to that seen in the NIH data. In this study, there was a preponderance of males committing suicide (6:2). In each of the cases, the reasons for committing suicide coincide with the NIH data (i.e. depression, stressful life events). Although one of the cases involved a male using a firearm as a means of suicide and one case involved a female using a poison to commit suicide, these were not common means of suicide as people seldom kill themselves by inflicting multiple shotgun wounds and ingesting acetylferrocene. Additionally, people seldom commit suicide via means of ligature strangulation. The remaining cases also illustrate uncommon and unusual methods of suicide. In this small study, six of the eight individuals had a prior documented suicide attempt.

Suicide is one of the most preventable deaths in the society and the recognition and treatment of depression is underscored. However, the medical examiner/coroner will continue to examine suicide deaths especially in economic hardship as recently experienced in the United States. This paper serves to introduce some uncommon methods of suicide recently observed during the 2008 year.

Suicide, Unusual Methods, Chicago, IL