



Pathology Biology Section – 2011

G7 Plastic Bag Asphyxia: Suicide and Literature

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The goal of this presentation is to show: (1) the importance of a careful autopsy in cases of asphyxia; (2) the importance of the death scene traces; and, (3) the influence of the literature in some cases of suicide.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showing how the literature and media could influence and help someone to commit a suicide.

Asphyxial deaths using plastic bags are not common. Most frequently classified as suicide or accident (usually involving children, volatile inhalants, and autoerotic situations), they also can have a homicide origin. The death may be caused by mechanisms such obstruction of the external air passages, usually called smothering, and/or oxygen deprivation, included in the general group of mechanical asphyxia by suffocation.

The cases of suicide using plastic bags have increased with the publication, in March 1991, of the book *Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying* written by Derek Humphry. The book describes this method of suicide, in combination with drugs, as a painless way for those suffering from a terminal illness to end their lives. In New York City asphyxia deaths using plastic bags increased by more than 300% immediately following the publication of the book. However, these deaths have only been responsible for less than 5% of all suicides in the year after the book was released. In many other countries, like Portugal, this method of suicide is however rarely used.

The death scene investigation may be crucial to determine a suicidal aetiology. As a matter of fact, if the plastic bag has been removed, and as in such cases the external evidence of injury could be minimal, the death may be initially understood as a natural death.

A case of suicide using plastic bag is presented, in which the victim, a retired translator, left nearby the book *Final Exit* open to the chapter

Suicide Using Plastic Bag. Some pills were also found, as well as letters expressing his suicide intentions and last will.

The need, in such situations, of a high index of suspicion for the diagnosis of this entity is emphasized. When numerous petechiae are present, particularly in the conjunctivae, an attempt to identify their origin should be made to exclude other manner of the death, such strangulation. So, a full and careful autopsy, including toxicological analysis, combined with the investigation of the evidence at the death scene is mandatory in these cases.

Plastic Bag, Asphyxia, Suicide