



D73 Assisted Suicide Teams: A Final Exit Case Study

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how assisted suicide teams, also known as "Exit Guides," are being used in order to provide hands-on assistance in executing a suicide as well as removal of all evidence from the death scene in order to elude detection that the death was an intentional act.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community and legal community by providing information regarding the methods used by the Final Exit Network and their "Exit Guides."

Assisted suicide is a controversial topic with many supporters on both sides of the debate. However, what is not debatable is that in most of the United States and other countries all over the world, assisted suicide is considered to be illegal; with some areas considering it to be a homicide to assist someone in ending their life. Physician-assisted suicide is legal in certain instances in three states which include Oregon, Washington, and Montana. Many cases have documented family/friends assisting a loved one to commit suicide. This presentation will focus on volunteer Exit Guides from the Final Exit Network and provide information regarding the signs/evidence to look for when investigating a death which may initially appear to be from natural causes.

The Final Exit Network is the only organization in the United States that will help individuals who have non-terminal illnesses to hasten their deaths. The best known "how-to" guide is Derek Humphry's 1991 *Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying*, which was a New York Times best seller.¹ Individuals considering taking their own life are able to obtain assistance from this network after they become a member of the Final Exit Network and undergo an application process. Once approved to receive services they are then assigned two Exit Guides to assist them with the preparation of, completion of, and clean-up after their suicide. Methods for hastening death are varied with the most notable being the use of helium and plastic bag asphyxiation.²

A case study of the death of a 64-year-old woman whose death was initially thought to be from natural causes will be presented. Months later, the woman's name appeared on a list obtained by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) of individuals who contacted the Final Exit Network for assistance with their suicide. The GBI contacted the South Carolina State Law Enforcement Division (SLED) who notified local jurisdictions of potential cases that may need to be reviewed. The case was re-opened and investigated. This presentation will show participants the forms used by the Final Exit Network, the information they gather before agreeing to provide exit assistance, and the instructions provided to those seeking their assistance which ensure that the suicide is not detected. It is recommended that medicolegal death investigators become familiar with the methods used by the Final Exit Network and volunteer Exit Guides as deaths, which may initially appear to be from natural causes, may be a suicide which was covered up by "Exit Guides" who remove evidence from the death scene. Exit Guides have been criminally charged in multiple states after further investigation into the deaths of individuals whose names appeared on the list obtained by the GBI.

References:

- ¹ Humphry, D. 1991. *Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying*. Eugene, OR: The Hemlock Society.
- ² Ogden, RD. & Wooten, RH. Asphyxial Suicide with Helium and a Plastic Bag. *Am J Forensic Med Pathol*, 2002; 23(3), 1-4.

Assisted Suicide Teams, Final Exit, Death Investigation