



Psychiatry & Behavioral Science Section - 2015

I38 Suicide by Suffocation: A Case Report of an Elderly Woman Who Completed Suicide by Suffocation

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be informed about rare methods of committing suicide and, in particular, learn about suicide by suffocation/asphyxiation. Attendees will also be alerted to forensic issues related to patient suicide; additionally, risk factors for completing suicide will be reviewed. Recommendations regarding psychoeducation to health care providers and patients will be explored.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by educating attendees about rare methods of suicide and populations vulnerable to suicide by suffocation.

Each year, approximately 38,364 people die by suicide, making it a leading cause of preventable death in the United States, surpassing automobile accidents (33,687). Studies also report a 16% increase in death by suicide during the period 2000-2010. This has resulted in 12.6 people dying per day by suicide in the United States. Having a mental illness or engaging in substance use puts one at a significantly higher risk for suicide completion. While firearms continue to be the most common method for suicide completion, studies suggest that suicide by hanging or asphyxiation showed the most dramatic increase. In 2000, 19% of all suicides were completed by hanging or asphyxiation and in 2010, it rose significantly to 26%. While suicide by hanging or asphyxiation is on the rise, specifically, suffocation using a plastic bag remains an extremely rare method of suicide and it is fairly underreported in the literature. Literature indicates that the majority of plastic bag suffocation is in the context of a suicide attempt carried out by either those with mental illness or the elderly using sedatives.

Case: A case of a 70-year-old woman with mental illness and numerous medical co-morbidities is presented. In addition, she had a history of cocaine abuse and a tortuous relationship with her husband. She presented to the medical and psychiatric emergency room numerous times with reported anxiety and various somatic complaints. She completed suicide by asphyxiation using a plastic bag two days after she was examined in the psychiatric emergency room and cleared for discharge where she presented with complaints of anxiety. Upon completion of an autopsy, homicide was ruled out.

Discussion: Suicide by asphyxiation/suffocation with a plastic bag, while rare, has shown a significant increase in the United States and worldwide. It is poorly understood and infrequently reported in the forensic literature. This presentation intends to alert the forensic community about this rare method of suicide and to educate mental health professionals about its increased incidence in the United States. Further, the goal is to review current methods of psychoeducating our patients about suicide and to expand on modalities currently in practice. In addition, this study will explore the physician's perspective of a patient suicide and the potential forensic implications.

Conclusion: The goal of this case is to add to the growing literature about suicide by suffocation and bring to light the need for future investigations to better understand what specific populations are vulnerable and at risk.

Suffocation, Suicide, Mental Illness