



E32 A Case Review of a Suicide by Homemade Miniature Cannon

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have reviewed a case of suicide by handcrafted cannon in a rural, residential setting.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by presenting a unique scenario in which an individual may utilize a non-traditional firearm to commit suicide, even in a community where legal access to firearms is prevalent.

This presentation may assist law enforcement and medicolegal investigators by contributing to the understanding of the manner in which a thorough scene investigation can reveal unconventional methods of injury. In this case, a multidisciplinary approach to death investigation was imperative as a detailed account of the decedent's social and occupational history undoubtedly provided additional insight into the unique method of injury.

Firearm-assisted suicide is the most prevalent method of suicide in the United States.^{1,2} While they do occur, instances of suicide by handmade firearms are relatively rare in the United States as the ability to obtain legal access to firearms is widespread throughout most of the country. Suicides by handmade firearms are more frequently reported in countries or communities where access to firearms is limited or restricted, or where economical or financial restraints may prohibit the purchase of a firearm.^{1,3} Typically, manually constructed firearms utilized in cases of suicide are reported to mimic the mechanics of low-caliber weapons or shotguns. This presentation will present circumstances of the scene investigation and autopsy findings for an unusual case in which a successful suicide was carried out with a handmade miniature cannon.

The deceased in this case was a 56-year-old male who resided with his wife in a rural, manufactured residence in Florida. The decedent's wife had recently moved out of the residence, and the decedent was known to have a history of depression and suicidal thoughts. While having a conversation with his wife, the decedent suggested that he may harm himself, and his wife notified law enforcement. Law enforcement responded to the residence and found the decedent's body in a bedroom. He was lying in a supine position on the bed with obvious trauma to his face. A cigarette lighter and a miniature handcrafted cannon were found in proximity to the body. A letter to his wife was left in the living room. After subsequent investigation of the circumstances, foul play was not suspected.

The decedent was a skilled welder and subsequent investigation revealed that he had constructed multiple miniature cannons with detachable wheels during the 1980s. Published reports of suicide by handcrafted firearm discuss the common manner in which an individual may construct a firearm for the purpose of committing suicide; however, this case presents a unique perspective, as the handcrafted firearm in this case was not constructed with the intention to cause harm. The decedent constructed the miniature cannons to use at celebratory events and gave one cannon to a family member as a gift. He was known to load the cannon with various materials in order to provide a "bang effect" at weddings or on holidays. While the decedent's reason to choose a handcrafted cannon as a method of suicide over more traditional methods, such as hanging or prescription medication overdose, may not be known, a review of the literature suggests that it is not unreasonable to consider that a well-defined skill set and a degree of professional pride may have played a role.¹

This case study illustrates that a thorough investigation of scene circumstances is necessary in order to efficiently identify unconventional methods of injury and that subsequent investigation is crucial to eliminate the possibility of suspicious circumstances when a traditional firearm is not located at the scene. While access to firearms may be prevalent in rural, Florida communities, it is imperative for scene investigators to recognize atypical forms of firearms in cases of suicide in order to exclude homicide as a manner of death. Additionally, it is important for pathologists to gain insight into the unique injuries that may result from handcrafted firearms.

Reference(s):

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Suicide, Handcrafted Weapon, Cannon

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