



Pathology/Biology Section - 2016

H88 Influence of “Final Exit” on Asphyxial Suicides in New Mexico: A Retrospective Review

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand trends of asphyxial suicide in New Mexico utilizing suffocation by plastic bag with or without concurrent inhalation of an inert gas, as suggested by Derek Humphrey’s *Final Exit: the Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying*, originally published in 1991.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by helping attendees understand trends of asphyxial suicides in their own jurisdictions in regard to probable exposure to the book, “Final Exit,” and what characteristics and demographics are common in New Mexico in terms of utilizing the book for a method of suicide.

In 1991, Derek Humphry published *Final Exit: the Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying* in which he advocated for rational suicide: suicide by individuals who are terminally ill. In the first edition, there were detailed instructions for death by asphyxia by suffocation with a plastic bag over the head with or without premedication with sedatives such as barbiturates and benzodiazepines.¹ A later electronic supplement and second edition published in 2000 updated the recommended pharmaceuticals and suggested the addition of exclusion of oxygen by inhalation of an inert gas like helium. The book is considered controversial as it also advocates for assisted suicide, and populations other than the terminally ill have used its methods.

Suicide, in general, is prevalent in New Mexico and constitutes approximately 7% of all deaths investigated by the state’s Office of the Medical Investigator (OMI) annually. This study seeks to evaluate the impact of the publication of *Final Exit* on suicides in this population. Cases of asphyxial suicide investigated between January 1, 1985, and December 31, 2012, were selected by keyword search in the OMI’s electronic database; hangings were excluded. Each autopsy case was evaluated for demographics of the deceased, exposure to *Final Exit* (evidence of the book at the scene, the presence of an internet search, etc.), presence of any terminal diseases, and history of psychiatric illness. Data were analyzed using logistic regression to determine relationships between independent variables (gender, age, use of inert gas during asphyxiation, etc.) and exposure to *Final Exit* text.

Of the 122 individuals who died by asphyxial suicide, 45 were female, 77 were male, the vast majority (109) were non-Hispanic Whites, 17 had terminal illnesses, and 52 had a history of psychiatric disease. Age ranged from 18 years to 98 years of age with a mean age of 58. Exposure to *Final Exit* was determined to be “unknown” in 34 cases, as there was missing investigative information, and these cases were excluded from statistical analysis. Of the remaining 88 individuals, 20 had documented exposure to *Final Exit* (presence of the text or related materials or an internet search at the scene). Of these 20 individuals, 11 were female, 9 were male, and age ranged from 38 years to 96 old with a mean of 67.9 years. Eight individuals (40%) had a history of psychiatric disease and only four had terminal diseases (20%). Of the 68 individuals without exposure to *Final Exit*, 21 were female, 47 were male, and age ranged from 18 years to 96 years old with a mean of 56.9 years. Forty-four individuals had a history of psychiatric disease (65%) and four (15%) had a history of terminal illness. The logistic regression model revealed that females committing suicide by asphyxia were more likely to have been exposed to *Final Exit* and the probability of *Final Exit* possession increased with age. Males were less likely to have exposure to *Final Exit*, but likelihood increased with age. Usage of an inert gas increased the probability of *Final Exit* exposure significantly (53 times).

These results describe the individuals dying of asphyxial suicides and their potential exposure to *Final Exit* and suggest that its methods are regularly utilized outside Derek Humphry’s intended population. Although the annual incidence of suicide by suffocation has risen slightly since 1990, the percentage of deaths investigated by the OMI and ruled to be suicide has stayed constant, averaging 7.4% between 1985 and 2013; however, that exposure to *Final Exit* could not be determined retrospectively in 34 of the identified cases limits the interpretation of this data. Impact of *Final Exit* on the incidence of suicidal overdoses, also suggested by the book, was not evaluated and could be a direction for future study.

Reference(s):

1. Humphry, D. (2002). *Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Delta Trade Paperback.

Final Exit, Suicide, Suffocation

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