



E61 A Unique Medicolegal Investigation Following a Suicidal Gunshot Wound of the Head

Brett E. Harding, MBA, District 5 MEO, 809 Pine Street, Leesburg, FL 34748; Barbara C. Wolf, MD, District 5 MEO, 809 Pine Street, Leesburg, FL 34748; and Kyle Shaw, MBBS, District 5 ME Office, 809 Pine Street, Leesburg, FL 34748*

After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to recognize that atypical scenes involving firearms can lead to erroneous assumptions regarding the manner of death. Attendees will also understand how this type of case necessitates the utilization of a multidisciplinary medicolegal investigative approach in order to arrive at an accurate manner of death.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating how inaccurate conclusions can lead to additional expenditures of resources and potential ill will with surviving family members.

The presentation and positioning of firearms in suicidal gunshot wounds, while not predictable, often follow familiar patterns. Deaths caused by the use of semiautomatic handguns can result in multiple differing presentations of the firearm, which may include: the weapon ejecting the spent casing and automatically chambering an additional round, the opened breach that is often observed when the magazine is exhausted, or “stove piping” or other jamming of the spent shell casing. Conversely, revolvers typically demonstrate the familiar pattern of the spent casing being found in the cylinder position, directly under the hammer.

This study presents an unusual case of a suicidal gunshot wound resulting in a unique death scene investigation due to presentation of the weapon and ammunition. This atypical death scene generated concerns by investigators, who began to question the assumed manner of death.

A 76-year-old man was discovered dead in the pump house of his residence. The decedent suffered from psychiatric illnesses that included auditory hallucinations and paranoia with suspicion of an imagined impending arrest. The initial investigation of the crime scene did not lead to any suspicions of foul play due to his history of mental illness and a note identified within the home.

The body of the decedent was discovered leaning against the back wall of the non-air conditioned building. Examination of the fully clad body revealed full rigor and blanching-dependent lividity that was consistent with the found position of the body. A contact gunshot wound was identified on the right side of the head. A corresponding defect was noted on the scalp on the left side of the head. Blood was observed on the head, right arm, and clothing of the decedent. Liquid, clotted, and dried blood had pooled on the floor around the decedent. Blood spatter was identified on the wall of the building to the right of the decedent.

During the investigation a black, .38 caliber, Rossi® revolver was found gripped in the decedent’s right hand. The cylinder was open and all of the live rounds and the spent shell casing were emptied or nearly emptied from the weapon. The subsequent shells were located on both sides of the decedent’s right leg and underneath the leg.

This unusual finding required a multidisciplinary medicolegal investigation that revealed the death to be consistent with a suicidal gunshot wound of the head, despite the atypical presentation. This case, yet again, illustrates the importance of utilizing a multidisciplinary medicolegal approach in arriving at a cause and manner of death.

Multidisciplinary, Suicide, Firearm