



H122 Suicide by Trash Compactor

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand that there are multiple modalities by which one can commit suicide. One of the more unusual modalities is by entering a trash compactor. At the end of the trash chute is a compacting bin that creates devastating, crushing injuries to the decedent. The body can easily lay undiscovered and the compactor contents may be transferred to a distant landfill without the knowledge of law enforcement, friends, or family.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by sharing this unusual method of committing suicide, and will alert law enforcement and forensic pathologists to consider this possibility when searching for the body of a missing person. Recovery of a body is critical to the grieving process and consideration of the circumstances and injuries helps provide family members with an explanation for the death of their loved one.

Suicide is a significant global public health concern. In the United States, nearly 43,000 people die by suicide every year, with an estimated cost of 44 billion dollars. The annual age-adjusted suicide rate is 12.93 per 100,000 population, and this rate is increasing. Overall, suicide is the tenth leading cause of death. Men are nearly four times more likely to commit suicide than women, and most suicides occur in middle-aged White men. Nearly half of all suicides involve a firearm. Violent and highly lethal methods of suicide are more frequently seen among men.¹ Individuals typically choose a suicide method based upon social acceptability, including cultural factors, and opportunity.² A case involving a rare and unusual suicide modality – use of a trash compactor will be presented.

A trash compactor is a machine used to reduce the size of waste material via compaction, using a hydraulic pressure system. Fatalities associated with compactors are usually determined to be accidents, such as those occurring in the workplace or from individuals falling asleep in bins, before being crushed in garbage trucks. Compactors are used in residential apartment buildings to process the large amounts of waste generated, which helps to control rodent infestations in multistory buildings. Compaction ratios, the volume reduction created by a compactor, can be as high as 20 to 1.³

A 52-year-old Hispanic man, with a history of depression, traveled from Georgia to New York City to visit his estranged wife in an attempt to reconcile their relationship. He was last seen alive at 9:00 a.m. when his wife went to work. That afternoon, his daughter, who was in the apartment in her bedroom all morning and early afternoon, discovered dried blood droplets in many areas of the apartment. She found blood on the sheets of the mattress in the living room where her father had been sleeping. The daughter also found blood in the open silverware drawer in the kitchen and on the kitchen floor. The daughter called 911 to report her father missing.

The police performed a search of the apartment, hallway, and all public areas, including the perimeter of the apartment building. They identified a blood trail leading from the apartment, along the hallway, and to the trash compactor closet on the same floor. The door to the compactor chute also had blood on it. The police went to the basement, eight floors below, and entered the compacting room, where the body was discovered inside a compacting container.



Pathology/Biology - 2017

At autopsy, the decedent was normally developed and well nourished, 5'6" and 147lbs. It was determined from the measurements of the compactor chute door that the decedent was able to fit through the chute if he entered with his shoulders positioned diagonally.

There were multiple blunt impact injuries, including crushing and avulsion of bones and organs. There were multiple fractures of the skull and vertebral column. Every rib was fractured at least once. Multiple compound fractures of the humeri, femurs, tibia, and fibula were noted. There was avulsion of major organs including the brain, lungs, heart, liver, spleen, and kidneys. A horizontal incised wound was observed on the ventral aspect of the left wrist. Adjacent to this incised wound were multiple parallel superficial incised wounds, all consistent with hesitation injury.

Trash compactor fatalities produce blunt impact injuries from the violent crushing motion of the compactor. This case represents a rare suicidal act by such a method. Individuals more frequently choose suicide modalities such as asphyxia, firearms, or ingestion of pills or poison. A thorough case investigation, including a detailed history, scene investigation and autopsy findings are necessary to determine the manner of death, so that accident or homicide can be excluded. This case highlights the importance of law enforcement performing a thorough search at the scene, including all accessible areas, such as the roof, basement, and surrounding grounds. The thoroughness of law enforcement in this case allowed the decedent to be discovered immediately. Had this modality not been considered, the decedent may have been transported to a distant site where his remains may have gone unnoticed for weeks, months, or even longer.

Reference(s):

1. National Suicide Statistics: <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide/statistics/index.html>.
2. Methods of suicide: international suicide patterns derived from the WHO mortality database <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/9/07-043489/en/>.
3. The Case for Trash Compactors: <http://www.buildings.com/article-details/articleid/14213/title/the-case-for-trash-compactors.aspx>.

Suicide, Trash Compactor, Unusual Suicide Modalities