



E19 A Tale of Two Sisters: A Case Review of a Suicide Pact Between Adult Siblings

Meryle A. Dotson, MA*, Hillsborough County Medical Examiner's Office, Tampa, FL 33616; Mary Mainland, MD, Hillsborough County Medical Examiner's Office, Tampa, FL 33617

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will be more familiar with a case of a successful suicide pact involving two adult siblings by ingestion of tramadol, doxylamine, diphenhydramine, and hydrocodone.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by presenting a unique scenario in which a thorough investigation of the death scene revealed evidence of premeditation and cooperation between two sisters who chose to enter into an agreement to end their lives together.

This information will assist law enforcement and medicolegal investigators by contributing to the understanding of the manner in which a scene investigation can reveal the sequence of events leading to the simultaneous deaths of two individuals. In this case, a multidisciplinary approach to death investigation was imperative. A detailed examination of the scene, thorough autopsy examination, and toxicological analysis permitted investigators to reasonably exclude the deaths to be results of a homicide-suicide.

A suicide pact is defined as a mutual agreement between two or more people to kill themselves, usually at the same time and location.¹ Suicide pacts are rare occurrences and represent less than four percent of all suicides. The frequency of successful suicide pacts is noted to be highest in Japan, where suicide pacts are more often reported among lovers.² In the United States, suicide pacts have been reported among aging, married couples as well as among siblings who face separation due to the ailing health of another sibling.¹ When investigating cases of reported suicide pacts involving two decedents, a thorough investigation of the death scene is imperative in determining whether the deaths of both individuals are a result of a successful suicide pact as opposed to a homicide-suicide. An essential component of a suicide pact that can be identified at the death scene is evidence of consent by both parties.³ This presentation will present circumstances of the scene investigation and autopsy findings for an unusual case in which a successful suicide pact was carried out between two adult sisters who entered into an agreement to end their lives together, likely due to the failing health of the older sister.

The deceased in this case are a 61-year-old woman and her 52-year-old sister who resided together in an apartment in a residential Florida neighborhood. The older sister was previously diagnosed with multiple medical conditions, and her younger sister served as her primary caretaker. Neither sister had been seen during the week prior to being found deceased. Apartment complex staff noted a foul odor emanating from the residence and contacted law enforcement. Law enforcement forced entry into the residence and located the bodies of both siblings in states of decomposition on a bed in a rear bedroom. A table in the corner of the room contained two personalized memory boxes, urns, and pre-need contracts for cremation authorized by each sibling. A handwritten letter in the bedroom stated that the younger sister was not willing to continue life without her older sister and provided explicit instructions for final disposition of their bodies. The letter indicated that the sisters had no other surviving family members, and that they "choose euthanasia." The letter contained the signatures of both sisters. There was no apparent trauma to the bodies. Multiple empty juice bottles, empty pudding cups, and two empty vials bearing the initials of each sister were recovered from a plastic bin beside the bed. After subsequent investigation of the circumstances, foul play was not suspected.

When investigating a death scene of a potential suicide pact, investigators should keep in mind the possibility that the deaths may be the results of a homicide-suicide. Due to their rare occurrences, suicide pacts are infrequently reported in the literature. However, the cases that are published describe several hallmarks of a suicide pact that can be identified at the death scene.³ Consent and understanding among all parties, detailed planning performed in secrecy, and execution of the pact in privacy are components of a suicide pact that cannot be identified by autopsy alone. This case study contributes to the documentation of suicide pacts between siblings in the United States and illustrates that a thorough, multidisciplinary investigation of the death scene is necessary in order to confidently determine the of manner of death as suicide by consensual means.

Reference(s):

1. Cohen, J. A Study of Suicide Pacts. *Med Leg J.* 1961;29:144-151.
2. Behera C., Rautji R., Kumar R., Pooniya S., Sharma P., Gupta S.K. Double Hanging With Single Ligature: An Unusual Method in Suicide Pact. *J Forensic Sci.* 2017 Jan;62(1):265-6.
3. Prat S., Rérolle C., Saint-Martin P. Suicide Pacts: Six Cases and Literature Review. *J Forensic Sci.* 2013 Jul;58(4):1092-8.

Double Suicide, Suicide Pact, Death Scene Investigation