



H16 Plugged, Unplayable Lies: A Case Report of a Novel Suicide by Foreign Body Airway Obstruction

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Learning Overview: The goal of this presentation is to illustrate a novel case of suicide by asphyxiation wherein the decedent intentionally self-occluded the airway by the introduction of multiple foreign objects.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by emphasizing the need for thoughtful and thorough scene investigation regarding manner of death in a case that could be interpreted as a likely homicide, as well as by highlighting the inventive nature of suicide enactors.

Introduction: Asphyxial deaths by choking and airway obstruction are most often characterized as accidents, such as elderly or inebriated individuals choking on a food bolus, or homicides, as in the case of robbery victims being silenced by gags.¹ Rarely are there reports of intentional self-introduction of foreign objects into the larynx for the purpose of taking one's own life. Such a case is described here.

Materials and Methods: The decedent was a 45-year-old Caucasian male found dead one morning in the basement of the home he shared with his mother. There were three strips of white tape measuring 1½ inches wide over the decedent's mouth, and there were multiple additional strips of tape hanging from the side of a nearby table. He was last known to be alive eight hours prior, and there had been no indication of intent for self-harm at that time. The scene showed no sign of a struggle or foul play, and there was no evidence of autoerotic behavior. The decedent had no known psychiatric history or evidence of recent psychosis.

Results: At autopsy, the decedent was found to have three soft-sided foam golf balls, each measuring 4cm in diameter, deep in the oral cavity occluding the larynx, with strips of adhesive tape fully covering the mouth. There were healing superficial incised wounds of the bilateral anterior wrists. There was no other evidence of acute trauma or recent violence. The remaining examination was unremarkable. Postmortem toxicology performed on blood was negative. The cause of death was determined to be asphyxiation due to airway obstruction by foreign bodies.

Upon further investigation, it was revealed that the decedent was about to be incarcerated for federal felony charges and had made comments to the effect that he "would not be going to jail." The manner of death was determined to be suicide.

Discussion: A literature review for suicidal self-asphyxiation with foreign bodies revealed these cases to be extremely rare, with most decedents choking on paper products or cloth.²⁻⁴ The rarity of suicidal self-asphyxiation is likely due to the act being difficult to complete.⁵ Unlike this current case, the actors typically demonstrate some degree of psychosis or have a history of schizophrenia.

Determining the manner of death can be challenging when the cause of death seems violent or unusual. As always, thorough scene investigation is crucial to be able to parse out suicidal intentions from what would otherwise appear to be accidental or even homicidal in nature.

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Suicide, Asphyxia, Airway Obstruction