

### 139 The Contribution of Suicide Notes in the Resolution of Doubtful Cases of Suicide: From the Psychological Autopsy to the Forensic Evidence—A Case Report and Review of the Literature

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the contribution of the suicide note in the resolution of doubtful cases of suicide.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by underlining the role of the psychological autopsy in suicide cases.

Suicide is a public health issue. Among young people, it represents the second cause of mortality. Approximately 10,000,000 people die every year from suicide and this number will rise to 15,000,000 by 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Italian epidemiological studies report that hanging (52.1%) is prevalent among men; falling (35.1%) and hanging (33.4%) is prevalent for women. A major propensity for suicide is found among older people.<sup>2</sup> Suicide is related to psychiatric disorders, previous attempts of suicide, alcohol or other substance abuse, a history of mistreatment, divorces, and unemployment.

Often, a suicide note is present, which is a letter left by the victim to explain the reasons for the suicide. From these notes, we can analyze the cause, the contest, and the choice of suicidal method. It is crucial proof in the investigation because it helps us understand, in doubtful cases, if it is an actual suicide. However, a suicide note can be also falsified.<sup>3</sup>

There are cases in which the suicide note is not present. In these cases, it is possible to perform a so-called psychological autopsy, a retrospective investigation into the victim's life and the potential causes that led to the suicide. The method consists of thorough structured interviews of relatives, friends, or doctors, collecting all available information about the victim to obtain a valuation of his/her life, personality, mental health, and relationships.<sup>4</sup>

There are different types of suicide notes (i.e., farewell, instructions, accusations of others, requests for forgiveness, and justifications), and they are often handwritten on paper. This facilitates, through a calligraphic comparison, the demonstration that the victim, and no other, wrote the note, rejecting the hypothesis of murder.<sup>3</sup> There are some cases in which the victim writes the note on clothes or on his/her skin, while with the advent of new technologies, young people also use email, social networks, and telephone messages. In these cases, the so-called social-mobile autopsy is conducted.<sup>5</sup>

Reported here is the case of a middle-aged woman found dead at home. The interview of relatives by the police highlighted that the woman's son found her body hanging from a rope knotted to an internal railing of the dwelling. However, during the scene inspection, the forensic pathologist and the investigators found the woman's body lying on a bed, with the rope cut at the node. The external examination of the woman presented a double-cutaneous furrow with characteristics of vitality and bruising. The morphology of the furrow insinuated doubts about the mode of death considering the contrasting witnesses of family members and the movement of the body, which did not allow understanding of exactly how it was suspended. During the investigation of her house, investigators found, in the bedroom, a handkerchief with the following suicide note: *Prayer before falling asleep to Mary. O Virgo, it's late. Everything falls asleep on the earth, it's time for rest, do not move away from me. Put your hand on my eyes like a good mother, close them to the things below. My soul is full of troubles and sadness the fatigue that awaits me is here near me. Put your hand on my forehead and stop my thought, sweet will be my rest if blessed by you because tomorrow the poor son wakes up stronger and happily resumes the weight of the new day. Put your hand on my heart and give back to God an eternal love. Amen*

The site inspection is very important in discriminating the circumstances in doubtful cases, in finding incongruities, background, and motivation that allows an explanation of the facts. The forensic investigation does not end with the detection of signs and analysis of the suicide location, but there is a clear necessity of coordination between the various sources of information: relatives, friends, and acquaintances, as well as diaries, notebooks, notes, computers, and more. The psychological autopsy is a new method to better understand the circumstantial data of the crime scene investigation, postmortem examination, and autopsy.

#### Reference(s):

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#### Forensic Sciences, Suicide, Psychological Autopsy

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