



## **E81 Self-Inflicted Gunshot Wound: Suicide or Accident? You Decide**

*Erin P. Koester, MS\*, Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, Alexandria, VA 22350; Joshua Mayo, MSFS\*, Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, Alexandria, VA 22350; William B. Andrews, MFS, Alexandria, VA 22310*

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the many challenges investigators face when evaluating crime scene evidence with a questionable manner of death.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will afford insight into the complexity of death investigations when there is a question of whether or not an individual self-inflicted a gunshot wound. The uncertainty of crime scene investigation and subsequent interpretation of an individual's actions should leave a lasting impact on attendees.

The discharge of a firearm, whether purposeful or accidental, leading to a self-inflicted gunshot wound, is a huge investigative challenge. Both purposeful and accidental discharges often contain similar evidence and case facts, and a decedent's sustained injuries, limited witness pool, and lack of circumstantial evidence (suicide note) only create more uncertainty.

When determining whether the manner of death is a suicide or accident, the forensic pathologist must evaluate whether an act caused an injury leading to death and whether the individual intended self-harm or death. For example, when a decedent dies during a game of "Russian Roulette," the forensic pathologist must determine whether the injury and subsequent death resulted from an intentional act or a mortal accident. Remember, high-risk behavior does not necessarily imply that a decedent intended death. While ultimately the forensic pathologist determines cause and manner of death, evidence an investigator uncovers greatly impacts that decision. The actions of the decedent immediately prior to the death, as well as, in the prior days, weeks, and months, can assist the investigators. Investigators may also use the decedent's social media activity, surveillance camera videos, and statements from friends, family, and others with whom the decedent may have had contact.

Two forensic science special agents will present a 2016 adult death case in which the forensic pathologist did not believe the manner of death was clear. They will provide information about the crime scene, evidence found, witness interviews, and other information to discuss the context around the cause of death. This presentation will explore the decedent's actions prior to the time of death and whether those actions, combined with the autopsy findings, resulted in an intentional self-inflicted injury causing death. They will present opposing interpretations of the evidence and argue those differing opinions. This presentation will conclude with the presenters challenging attendees to draw their own conclusions on the manner of death.

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### **Self-Inflicted, Suicide, Accident**