Suicide, accident? The importance of the scene investigation

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Abstract

We present the as yet unresolved case of the death by gunshot wound of a 21-year-old student from a recent local inspection. It was reported that the daughter of the house had been shot through the window while she was washing the dishes. Slight discrepancies were noted in the statements of the family, who are very religious. The firearm, projectile and cartridge have not been found despite an intensive search. The daughter and the mother tested positive for traces of gunpowder on their hands, while in the case of the son traces were found on his hands and on his vest. That the trajectory of the projectile was from the kitchen outwards was established on the basis of a small hole in the inner pane of the kitchen window and a larger hole in the outer pane. The shot passed through the victim’s cheek and the neck. The entrance wound (aditus) on the right cheek had complementary features characteristic of a gunshot from a short-barrelled firearm at relative proximity. The shot passed through the left jugular vein and the left internal carotid artery. The exit wound (exitus) was slightly larger and of irregular shape.

The family chose a traditional burial. The mother and son did not present themselves for polygraph testing. A charge was filed against the mother of the deceased. Emphasis was placed on the scene investigation.

A covered-up suicide? An accident (a scuffle when trying to prevent suicide)?

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1. Introduction

In the interest of public safety and the legal system, every case of suicide must be confirmed and unambiguously differentiated from natural death, homicide or accident. It is not uncommon for the family of the victim to insist that the cause of death be established (in order to establish the truth, to silence rumours, because of shame, for religious reasons or for insurance reasons). The same applies to neighbours and sometimes even the general public.

Contrary to popular belief, it is not evident at first glance whether a death is suicide; an initial description does not necessarily confirm the fact of suicide. Quite the opposite: suicide is an act, which must be systematically investigated. The incident must be methodologically reconstructed and the process psychopathologically analysed and logical connections must be drawn [1].

The reasons are therefore, manifold and various, since apart from true, genuine suicide or attempted suicide we also have apparent suicide, faked suicide, fictitious suicide, and simulated or covered-up suicide or attempted suicide. Strangulation is the only method of violent death, which cannot be carried out through suicide. For all other violent deaths the cause of death can be homicide, accident or suicide [2,4].

There are also scientific, professional and didactic reasons for all-round research into suicide and for a reliable confirmation of suicide. The confirmation that a death was suicide is not so simple or easy.

From the rich and varied case history of the Institute of Forensic Medicine, we have limited ourselves to an account...
of an interesting case from a local inspection during one of my recent turns of duty at the institute in Ljubljana. As far as the court is concerned the case is not yet closed.

2. Account of the case

The victim’s brother telephoned for urgent medical assistance and the police. He said that his sister had been shot in the head through the window while she was washing the dishes.

The medical emergency team established that she was dead at the scene.

During the scene investigation a large round bullet hole was found in the outer pane of the kitchen window, and a smaller hole in the inner pane. Fragments of glass could only be seen on the outside windowsill. The body of the 21-year-old woman was lying face-up on the kitchen floor between the sink and the counter, with a pool of blood by the head.

During the external examination of the corpse at the scene, and later at the ISM, we discovered a circular entrance wound (aditus) 8.9 mm in diameter (Fig. 1) in the right cheek with evident complementary features typical of a gunshot from a short-barrelled weapon from relative proximity [1], an exit wound (exitus) of irregular shape on the neck, behind the left ear (Fig. 2).

The victim’s mother said that she was in the living room next to the kitchen when she heard a bang. She found her daughter on the floor in the kitchen with blood coming out of her mouth. The son, who was in his room in the upstairs apartment, ran to see what was happening and then phoned for help.

A small round bullet hole could be seen in the inner pane of the kitchen window and a larger hole in the outer window with fragments of glass on the outside windowsill (Fig. 3).

During the autopsy we discovered a round fracture hole with a diameter of 9 mm (inwards fragmentation) in the front section of the left side of the lower jawbone behind the entrance wound (aditus) in the region of the right cheek, a bullet hole in the left jugular vein and the left internal carotid artery and an exit wound (exitus) on the neck behind the left ear. We also discovered signs of the projectile grazing the back of the root of the tongue, blood in the oral cavity and windpipe and signs of aspiration of blood. The direction of the wound channel, assuming the victim was in an upright position, was through the face from right to left in a slightly downwards and backwards direction [3].

During the scene investigation, despite an intensive search, the detectives did not find the weapon, the projectile

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Fig. 1. An 8.9-mm diameter entrance wound (aditus) in the right cheek with complementary features typical of a gunshot from a short-barrelled firearm from relative proximity.

Fig. 2. Irregularly shaped exit wound (exitus) behind the left ear.

Fig. 3. A small round hole in the inner pane of the kitchen window and a larger hole in the outer pane.
or even the cartridge [4]. The examination of the snowy ground in front of and around the house (Fig. 4) was also fruitless.

Traces of gunpowder were found on the son’s hands and under the hem of his vest, and on the hands of the mother and the daughter. The closest neighbours stated that at the time of the incident they were in front of the house (accompanying visitors to their car) and that they did not hear a bang or see anyone in the vicinity of the neighbours’ house.

On talking with the family of the deceased, the detectives established that the family was a very religious one. The mother was opposed to her daughter’s relationship with a boyfriend in the town where she was studying, and was particularly opposed to her plan to spend a week alone with her boyfriend in his parents’ flat while they were away on holiday.

Following the detectives’ insistence that the mother was concealing something about the matter, she declared that the case was beyond them. The mother and son were invited to submit themselves to a polygraph test. Half an hour before the appointment they announced that they would not take part in the test. A charge was filed against the mother of the deceased.

### 3. Discussion

A covered-up suicide? An accident (a scuffle while trying to prevent suicide)? Seen through the eyes of a forensic specialist, the case presented here is most probably a form of covered-up suicide, where a suicide is disguised as homicide in order to avert shame and consequences of a religious nature for a very devout family. The position of the victim, the type of firearm and the distance of the same at the time of the shooting have been established: with the help of the size and form of the holes in the inner and outer panes of the kitchen window and the fragments of glass on the outside windowsill, the position and size of the wound channel on the face and neck, the position and appearance of the entrance and exit wounds, the 9-mm-diameter round hole in the fragmented bone of the lower jaw and the fragmentation of the inner part of the bone in the direction of the wound channel. The location of the entrance wound on the right side of the cheek, the distance of the firearm at the time of the shot, the direction of the wound channel and the traces of gunpowder found on the hands [5–7] of the mother suggest that the most likely hypothesis is that the mother was trying to prevent her daughter from committing suicide. The firearm, which is of key importance for the confirmation of this hypothesis, is missing and despite an intensive search we have not found it. The emphasis is on the scene investigation [8]. The examining judge has not opted for exhumation.

### References


