

Things Aren't Always As They Appear: How a Suicide Becomes a Homicide

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Disclosures

- No financial disclosures – I would love to have some though

Suicide vs Homicide

- Both are Manners of Death (Not Causes)
 - Cause of Death – injury or disease that leads to physiological change that results in death
 - Mechanism of Death – the physiological change produced by the cause of death
 - Manner of Death – how the cause of death occurred
- Suicide – Death at ones own hands
 - Typically intentional
 - In some circumstances intent is not needed (“Russian Roulette”)
- Homicide – Death at the hands of another
 - Act is usually intentional but doesn't require intent to kill
 - Not a legal determination

Suicide vs Homicide

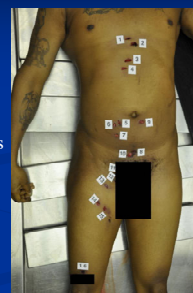
- Data from 2019
- 47,511 Suicides in USA (rate of 13.9 per 100,000)
- 19,141 Homicides in USA (rate of 5.6)
- Suicide
 - 10th leading “cause of death”
 - 2nd leading “cause of death” between ages 10 and 34
 - Rates are higher in men (22.4) than women (6.0)
 - 23,941 (50.4%) by firearm
 - 528 (rate of 16.7) in Iowa (30th lowest in the USA)
- Homicide
 - 80 (rate of 2.7) in Iowa (8th lowest in the USA)
 - VT has a homicide rate <1
 - MD, AK, MO, SC, NM, AL, LA, and MS have homicide rates ≥10
 - According to FBI data 73.7% by firearm

Some Perspective

- Firearm Deaths in 2017
 - 39,566 – USA
 - 294 (rate of 9.1, 9th lowest) – IA
- Drug Overdose Deaths in 2017
 - 70,319 – USA
 - 352 (rate of 11.5, 5th lowest) – IA
 - 2005 – 141, rate of 4.8

Anatomy of a Gunshot Wound

- Entrance: Entry point
 - Often round
 - Marginal abrasion
 - Soot, gunpowder, stippling, CO
- Pathway: What gets hit
- Associated injuries: Other resulting injuries
 - Temporary cavity
- Projectile
- Exit: Exit point
 - Often irregular or slit like
 - No marginal abrasion (most of the time)
 - No other entrance wound features
- Trajectory



Entrance Wounds



Exit Wounds



Range of Fire

- Contact (on the skin's surface)
 - Soot
 - Gunpowder
 - Muzzle imprint
 - Lacerations (on certain body parts)
- Near Contact/Close (up to a couple inches)
 - Soot
 - Gunpowder
 - Searing
- Intermediate (a couple inches to a couple feet)
 - Stippling – abrasions (not burns) from unburnt gunpowder particles
- Indeterminate (can't tell)
 - No range of fire characteristics

Contact



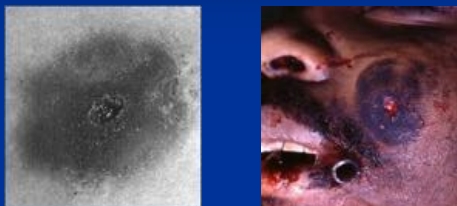
Contact



Contact



Near Contact/Close



Intermediate



Intermediate



Indeterminate



Case 1

- 41 yo male with gunshot wound of head
- Drinking with a friend in friend's basement
- Friend had a handgun and they began shooting into a bullet trap
- Decedent then put the gun to his head and shot himself
- Friend called 911
- Found in beanbag chair with can of beer and handgun
- No known medical or psychiatric history
- Treated as a suicide

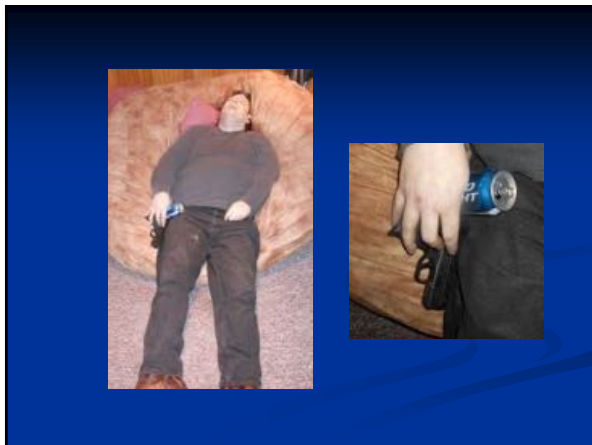
Case 1

- Autopsy
 - Contact range gunshot wound on right temporal scalp
 - Exit gunshot wound behind left ear
 - No other concerning natural disease or other injuries



Case 1

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 - Contact range gunshot wound on right temporal scalp
 - Exit gunshot wound behind left ear
 - No other concerning natural disease or other injuries
 - Consistent with suicide
- But look at the scene photos....



Case 1

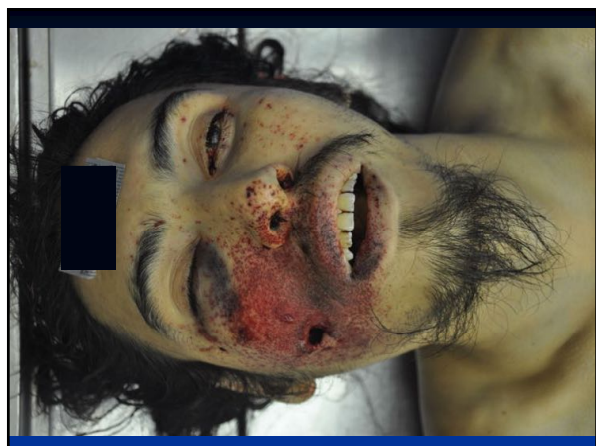
- Police talk to the friend again
 - Decedent and friend got into a fight over the gun
 - Friend pulled the trigger while gun was next to decedent's head
 - Claims he didn't mean to pull trigger and was trying to stop friend from shooting himself
 - Put gun and beer in decedent's hand so it looked like a suicide

Case 1

- COD: Gunshot Wound of Head
- MOD: Homicide

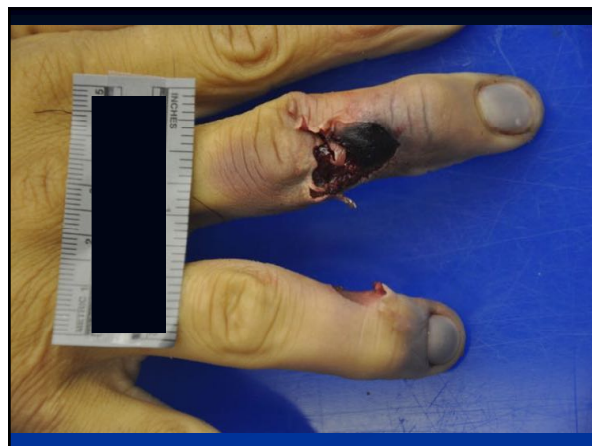
Case 2

- 30 year old male
- 911 caller reports hearing a gunshot
 - Then saw 2 people leaving his neighbor's residence talking about why he shot himself and whether or not they should call police
 - These 2 individuals get in a car and leave
 - Finds neighbor just inside the outer door of his residence with a handgun next to him
 - Calls 911
- Pronounced in emergency room



Case 2

- Autopsy
 - Gunshot wound of head
 - Entrance on right cheek surrounded by stippling
 - Intermediate range (couple inches to couple feet)
 - Exit behind right ear
 - So far seems consistent with a suicide
 - But then the handbags come off....



Case 2

- Autopsy
 - Gunshot wound of head
 - Entrance on right cheek surrounded by stippling
 - Intermediate range (couple inches to couple feet)
 - Exit behind right ear
 - Gunshot wound of right hand
 - Graze-like with soot and searing on middle and ring fingers of right hand
 - Contact range
 - Suicide seems less likely now
 - Pathway did not directly involve the brain
 - Facial bone fractures, subarachnoid hemorrhage
 - Remote contusion of left parietal lobe
 - No significant natural disease
 - Toxicology – Ethanol, blood: 0.206 g/dL; BE, blood: <25 mcg/L

Case 2

- Cause of Death
 - Gunshot Wound of Hand and Head
- Manner of Death
 - Homicide

Case 2

- 1 male and 1 female friend that were with him
 - Were hanging out and drinking with the decedent
 - Female called a friend and bought some cocaine that they then used
 - Decedent had a handgun which he brought out and was showing them
 - Female asked him to put the gun away so he went into his house
 - They hear a gunshot, see the decedent on the ground, and leave
 - They go to a friend's house and never call 911

Case 2

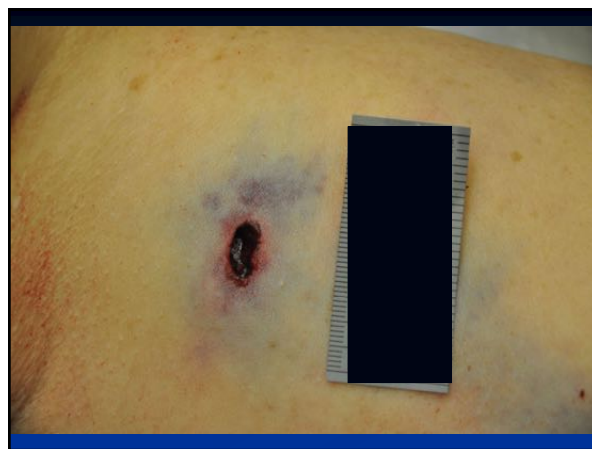
- Changing Stories
- Male Friend
 - Saw the decedent in the doorway raise his left arm up and then heard a gunshot
 - Was walking to the car when he heard the shot
 - Was sitting in a chair in the yard the whole time
 - The female was the last to hold the gun and must have shot the decedent
 - Saw the decedent with the gun in his right hand with either his index finger or thumb on the trigger at chest height pointed at his face
- Female Friend
 - Female maintained to only hearing a gunshot but not seeing anything
 - Female sent the male a text
 - "I just called...remember when u shot n killed your friend...I was scared as [heck]"
 - Later claimed text was a lie and only sent because she was mad at him
- Male asked to take a polygraph
 - Showed deception

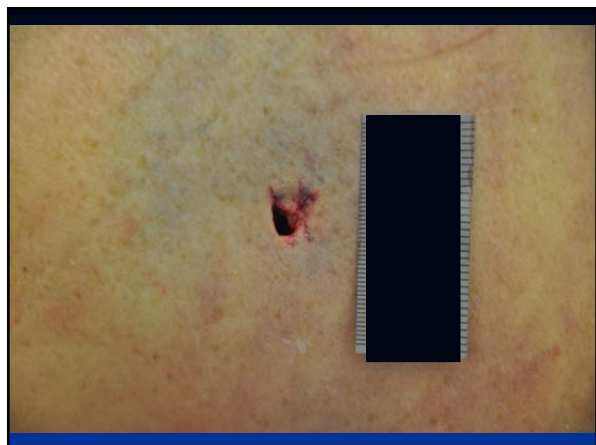
Case 3

- 68 year old female
- Lives with her son (lives in basement) and 12 year old grandson (lives upstairs near her)
- Recently took out \$7000 cash to pay off mortgage
- Grandson posts pictures on social media of him with the cash
- 0400 – calls police about an intruder
 - Saw a thin man in a hoodie standing outside her bedroom door
- Police respond and reportedly find the home secure and no intruder
- Son gives his mom a loaded .380 Hi-Point pistol to protect herself

Case 3

- 0631 second call to 911
 - Son reporting that his mom accidentally shot herself
- Son heard 2 gunshots then found mom bleeding in her room
- Grandson reported that grandma came into his room to wake him up, then she left his room
- He then heard a gunshot
- He saw his grandmother bleeding, she said she would be ok
- She staggered into her room and sat down then collapsed
- He did not see a gun
- Paramedics and police found a .380 Hi-Point at the top of the stairs near the decedent's room
- Police suspicious but favor suicide vs accident





Case 3

- Autopsy
 - Gunshot wound of left upper extremity
 - Entrance on lateral left arm – indeterminate range
 - Exit on medial left arm
 - Gunshot wound of chest – likely continuation from GSW of arm
 - Entrance on left axilla – indeterminate range
 - Exit on left side of back
 - Pathway through left lung
 - Nephrosclerosis
 - Toxicology – essentially negative
 - Locations and ranges of fire of GSWs make self-inflicted essentially impossible

Case 3

- Further Investigation
 - Possible bullet defects found in ceiling and clock
 - Bullet recovered from clock
 - .380 Hi-Point pistol recovered at top of stairs near bedrooms
 - Two 9 mm casings recovered from foyer at bottom of stairs
 - Evidence of forced entry with damage around a door and window

Case 3

- Cause of Death
 - Gunshot Wounds of Left Upper Extremity and Chest
- Manner of Death
 - Homicide

Case 4

- 60 year old female found in yard with bag and other belongings nearby
- Female 911 caller said she was cutting the grass at the home when she found the body



Case 4

- Caller was not cutting the grass
- Her boyfriend found the body but left because of outstanding warrants
- Neither the caller or her boyfriend are the owners of the home
- Home is known for being a "drug house"
- Caller claims to not know the decedent

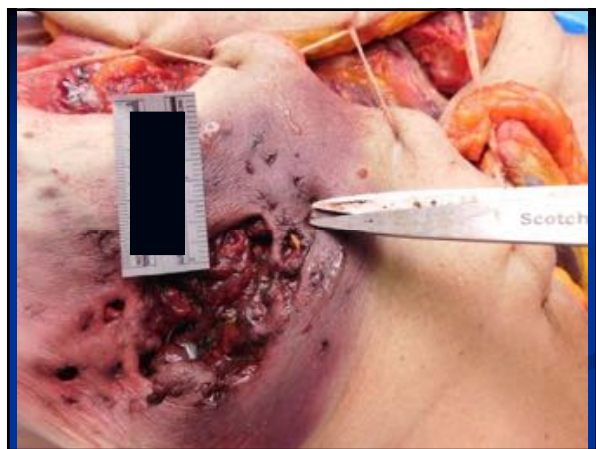


Case 4

- Multiple Sharp Force Injuries (Stab and Incised Wounds)
 - Neck – skin and soft tissue
 - Chest – heart and left lung
- Healing thermal injuries involving many parts of her body
- How did she get these injuries?
 - Homicide or Suicide?

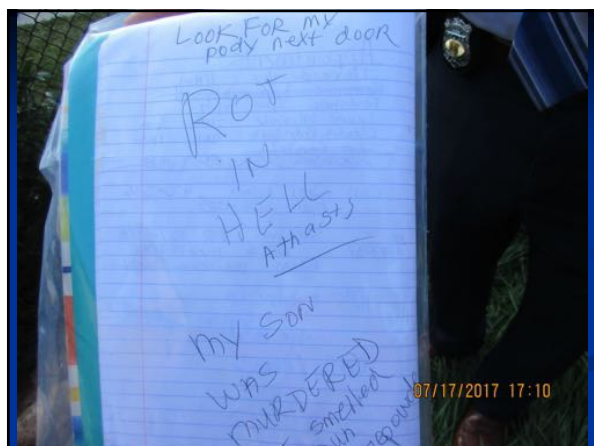
Case 4

- Further Investigation
 - A search of the property reveals a pair of bloody scissors near where the body had been



Case 4

- Further Investigation
 - A search of the property reveals a pair of bloody scissors near where the body had been
 - Scissors are consistent with the inflicting instrument
 - But who used the scissors
 - Near the scissors was the scissor packaging and a receipt for the purchase of the scissors
 - Video from the store shows the decedent alone buying the scissors
 - Decedent has no connection to this location
 - Son committed suicide in Illinois 2 years ago
 - Since that time she became very depressed and quit her job as a nurse and has been moving around the country
 - Strongly believed that her son was murdered
 - Notebook with suspicious writing found next door



Case 4

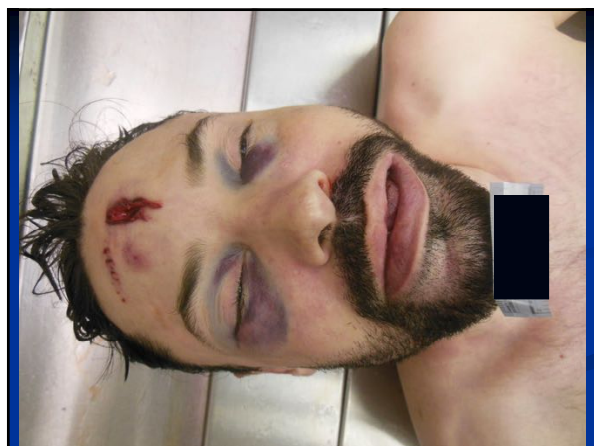
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 - Recently left a local hospital AMA while being treated for severe burns from a car fire – evidence that she intentionally started the fire

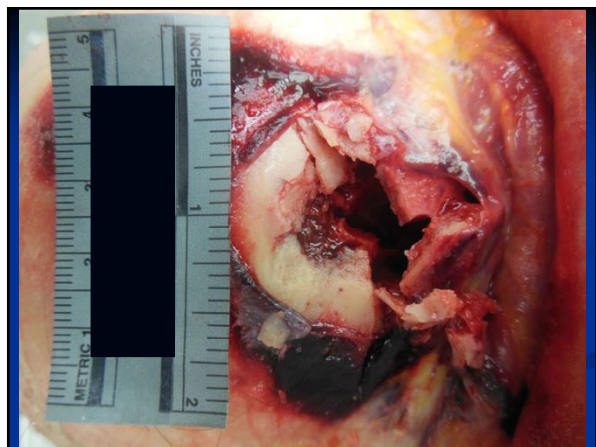
Case 4

- Cause of Death
 - Multiple Sharp Force Injuries of Neck and Chest
- Manner of Death
 - Suicide

Case 5

- 38 year old male
- Police were seeking him due to a domestic situation
- Located him at a local hotel
- Became involved in a standoff with police
- Officers attempted to make entry into the room
- Decedent fired a shot “into the ceiling” and officers retreated
- 7 minutes later a second shot was heard
- Found prone in the bathtub
- .45 caliber handgun and .45 ball ammo found with decedent
- 2 holes in the ceiling and 2 casings found

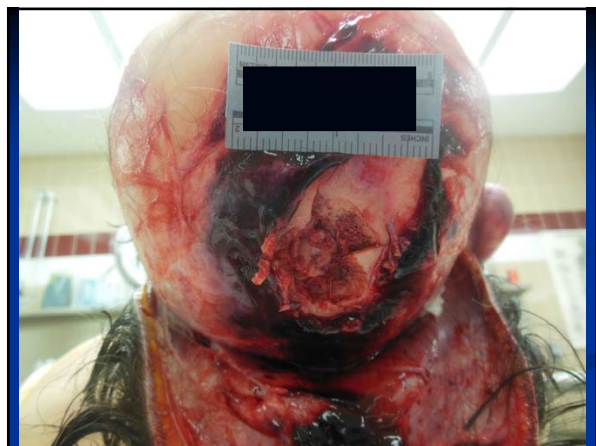




Case 5

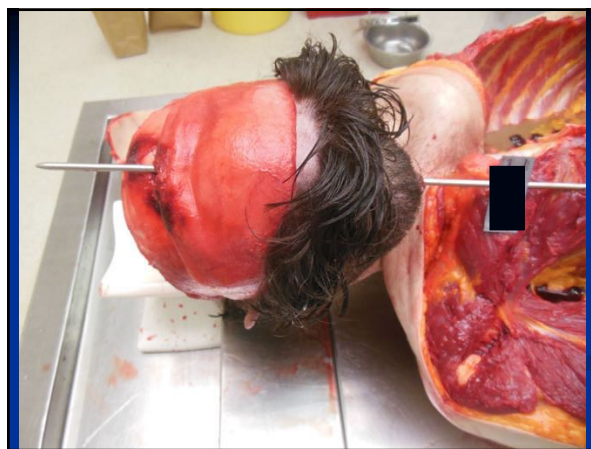
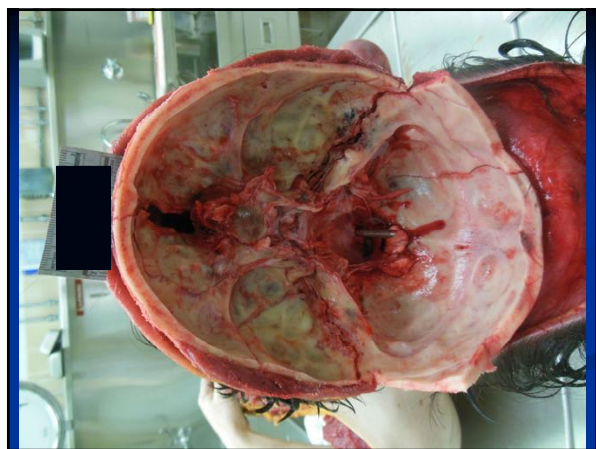
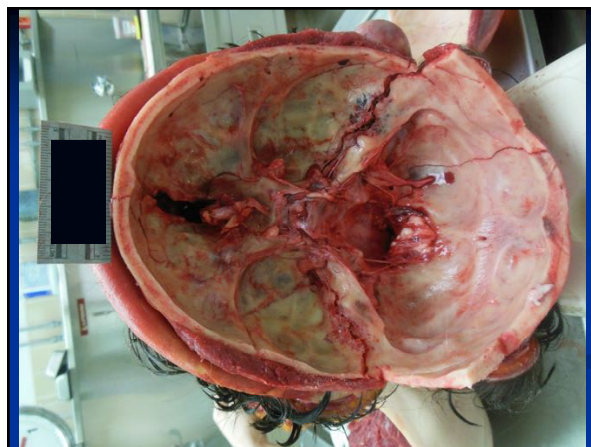
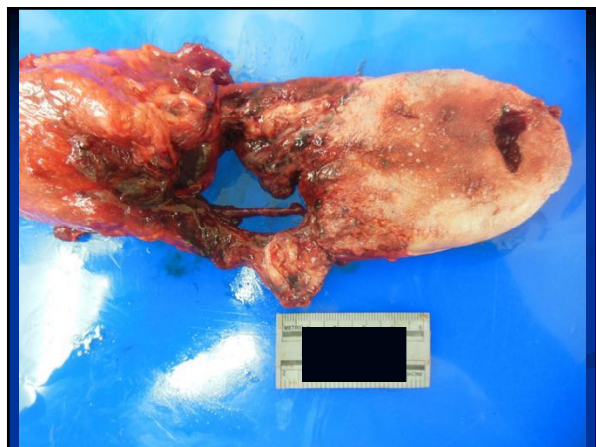
- Autopsy
 - Gunshot Wound of Head
 - Entrance: undersurface of chin with soot, searing, and contusion
 - Exit: forehead
 - Contact range
 - But then we flipped him over...





Case 5

- So now we have
 - 1 Entrance
 - 2 Exits
 - 0 Projectiles
 - In GSW math this does not add up
- We continue the autopsy...



Case 5

- Autopsy
 - Gunshot Wound of Head
 - Entrance: undersurface of chin with soot, searing, and contusion
 - Exit: forehead
 - Contact range
 - Pathway involved skin, soft tissue, and bones of face, tongue, and sinuses
 - Gunshot Wound of Head
 - Entrance: undersurface of chin with soot, searing, and contusion
 - Exit: occipital scalp
 - Contact range
 - Pathway involved brainstem, cerebellum, right occipital lobe
 - No significant natural disease
 - Toxicology insignificant

Case 5

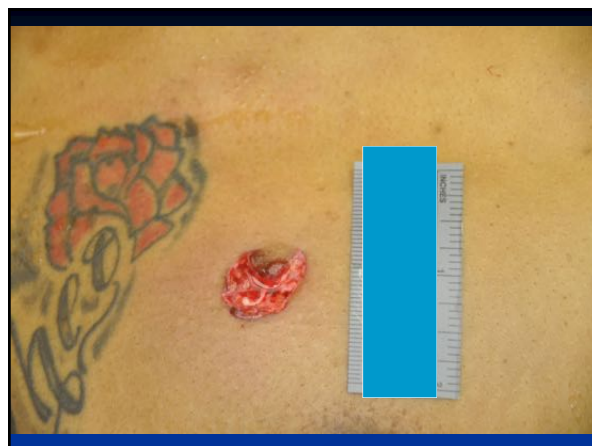
- Cause of Death
 - Gunshot Wounds of Head
- Manner of Death
 - Suicide
- Autopsy helped to confirm story
 - Except that the first shot didn't just go into the ceiling, it first went through his head
 - Findings from autopsy would support that he would have been able to shot himself twice, even 7 minutes apart

Case 6

- 26 yo Female
- Driving car with her mother in front passenger seat with unrestrained infant on her lap and an unrestrained 3 year old in the back seat
- Decedent's boyfriend is a security guard and his gun was in a holster in the car
- Decedent took gun out of the holster and placed it under the front seat – so that it would be safer
- Gun slide back to the 3 year old who fired the gun through the driver seat and hit the decedent

Case 6

- Autopsy
 - Entrance gunshot wound on back
 - Exit gunshot wound on chest
 - Pathway through right lung, IVC, and heart



Case 6

- COD: Gunshot Wound of the Back
- What about manner?
 - Homicide?
- MOD: Accident
 - Rare case where MOD in firearm death is accident
 - Circumstances and age of shooter main determining factors

Take Home Messages

- It is best to autopsy all possible suicides
- Investigation is a team effort
 - Medical Examiner – County and State
 - Medical Examiner
 - Forensic Pathologist
 - Investigators
 - Autopsy Assistants
 - Law Enforcement
 - County Attorney
 - Family
 - Other
- Scene photos are very important and necessary
 - Accuracy and quality matter
 - May make a big difference in MOD and maybe even COD

Take Home Messages

- Don't ever assume – do a thorough investigation
- Don't tell families things that you do not know or make promises that are not in your power to keep
 - "This is clearly an accident and not a suicide."
- It is best to autopsy all possible suicides
- Scene Photos
- Don't post pictures of yourself with large sums of money on social media

References

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GO
BYU COUGARS

