

CASE REPORT

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Russian Roulette with a Knife

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ABSTRACT: The following case report describes an accidental stabbing that occurred on Halloween. The unwitting victim, while preparing for a holiday charade, stabbed himself with an ornamental dagger. By placing himself in a potentially hazardous situation, the victim's behavior entailed risk taking. The psychological implications of such risk taking are complex, and may be compared to such behaviors as russian roulette, gambling, and parasuicide.

KEYWORDS: pathology and biology, psychiatry, stab wounds

Accidental stabbings are uncommon tragedies. The statistical files at the Cuyahoga County Coroners' Office revealed only nine accidental stabbings out of all autopsied cases (15 063) over a ten-year period (1970 to 1980). The following case report describes an incident that occurred on Halloween, 1981. The pertinent psychological implications of the tragedy are discussed also.

Investigation

The police investigation revealed the following scenario. At approximately 8:00 p.m. on 31 October, the decedent was dressing for Halloween in his basement apartment. The 23-year-old male planned to masquerade as "Dracula" and participate in a local haunted house charade. A friend helped the decedent slip his undershirt, to which he had taped a rectangular piece of pinewood with duct tape, over his head. His friend then left the room and went upstairs to wait in the landlady's kitchen. The victim intended to insert an ornamental dagger into the wood simulating a dagger protruding from his chest. He had successfully practiced the charade the previous evening using a Bowie-type knife in the same board. The costume was completed with "stage blood" which was smeared liberally over the pinewood.

The fatal event was witnessed only by the decedent; however, the following circumstances are theorized. The decedent proceeded to pound the ornamental dagger into the pinewood with the claw hammer. The dagger was inserted beside the defect created in the wood by the Bowie knife causing a splitting of the board along its continuous grain. Subsequently the dagger completely penetrated the board and entered the victim's chest. This event occurred either while he was hammering the dagger into the wood or, subsequently after the dagger was in place, upon

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his accidentally falling on it. He pulled the dagger out of his chest and ran upstairs carrying it into the kitchen screaming "no s—t, ma, I stabbed myself."

The landlady and his friend initially thought the decedent was joking. When he collapsed on the kitchen floor and his chest wound became evident, emergency medical assistance was called. Despite intensive resuscitative efforts by the paramedical assistants, he was dead on arrival at the hospital.

Autopsy

The decedent was a slender white male who appeared the stated age of 23 years. The external examination was remarkable for white hair powder, black periorbital makeup, and white facial makeup simulating "Dracula." A tattoo depicting a skull emblazoned by a ribbon stating "Born To Lose" was noted on his left upper arm (Fig. 1).

A thoracotomy incision through the stab wound made accurate size determination impossible. The stab wound was located in the anterior midline precordium 1143 mm (45 in.) above the left heel and measured 38 mm (1.5 in.) in length edges apposed. The stab wound perforated the sternum, pericardial sac, and heart and penetrated the left lung. The estimated track length was 76.2 to 127 mm (3 to 5 in.). Hemopericardium of 150 cc and bilateral hemothoraces (left, 900 cc and right, 300 cc) were noted.

The remainder of the autopsy revealed no pathology. Toxicologic studies revealed only therapeutic blood levels of salicylate.



FIG. 1—Tattoo on left arm showing skull and ribbon emblazoned with "Born To Lose."

Physical Trace Evidence

Several items of evidentiary value were submitted in conjunction with this case including the following: a bottle of "stage blood," two knives, a claw hammer, four pieces of duct tape, two pieces of pinewood, and a thermal underwear shirt. The probable significance of these items will be discussed below.

The victim was wearing a white thermal undershirt that contained several areas of light pink stains as well as heavily blood soaked areas, and also had a gaping stab-type defect present in the anterior portion. Comparison of the stage blood and the light pink stains on the shirt indicated their common origin. Two pieces of silver color duct tape were positioned across the midposterior portion of the undershirt. Two separate pieces of duct tape found at the scene could be matched on their free edges with those on the shirt thus giving credence to the costume effect as well as to the method of the board attachment.

Two different knives found at the scene were examined in detail. One was a Bowie-type hunting knife having an overall length of 215.9 mm (8.5 in.), a blade length of 114.3 mm (4.5 in.), and a maximum width of 23.8 mm ($1\frac{5}{16}$ in.) at the hilt end. A small amount of brown staining was present on the tip end which could not be related to human blood. The other knife was a dagger style having an overall length of 241.3 mm (9.5 in.), a blade length of 114.3 mm (4.5 in.), and a maximum width of 23.8 mm ($1\frac{5}{16}$ in.) at the hilt end (Fig. 2). The blade was covered with red-brown stains which were confirmed to be human blood of the same type as the victim's. The ornamental knife handle contained a molded skull at the top which in turn had a 11.1- by 6.35-mm ($\frac{7}{16}$ - by $\frac{1}{4}$ -in.) flattened dull area on one portion of its vertex. This area was compared with the rounded end of the claw hammer but no definitive physical match could be obtained.

Two pieces of pine board having the combined overall dimensions of 114.3 by 76.2 by



FIG. 2—The lethal dagger. 1 in. = 25.4 mm.

22.23 mm (4.5 by 3 by $\frac{7}{8}$ in.) and physically matching along their fracture line were found at the base of the basement stairs (Fig. 3). The light pink stage blood stained the sections of board quite extensively. Examination of the fracture line showed the presence of two differently edged instrumentalities which could be successfully matched with the two knives in question (Fig. 4). Based upon previous information, the Bowie-type knife made the initial defect on the board; the insertion of the ornamental dagger along a parallel axis of 1.58 mm ($\frac{1}{16}$ in.) from and slightly above where the first defect occurred provided enough stress for this soft wood board to split in two. Sufficient force was being exerted at the time of the wood fracturing to drive the knife through the victim's sternum.

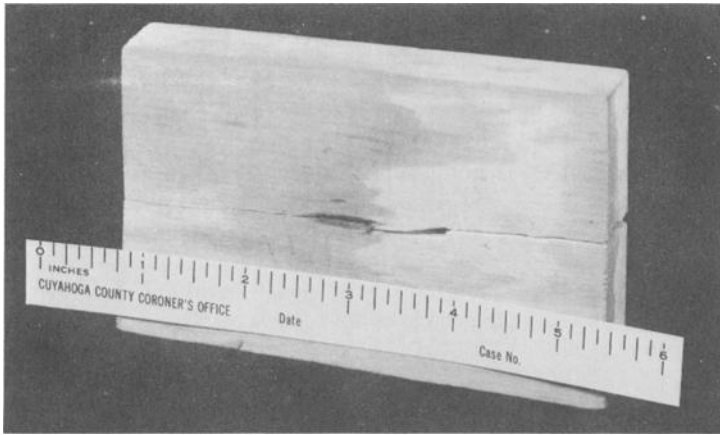


FIG. 3—The wood block split along the continuous grain defects created by the adjacent knife tracks. 1 in. = 25.4 mm.

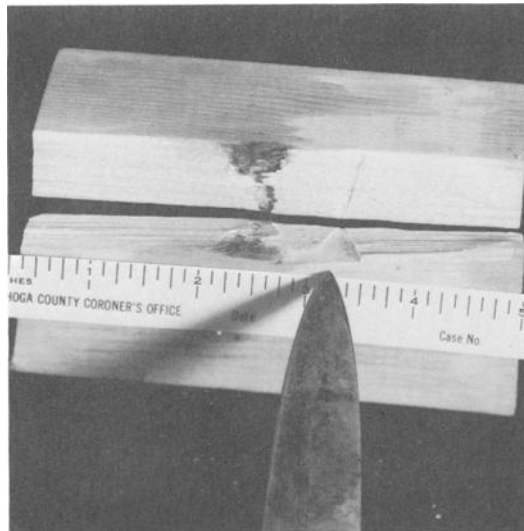


FIG. 4—The two halves of the block reflected to show the knife tracks. The track created by the lethal dagger is seen on the right. Note the blood stains on the edge of the dagger. 1 in. = 25.4 mm.

Discussion

Although this case was ruled as an accidental death, aspects of the case are open to speculation. The act of hammering an actual dagger into a board taped to one's chest certainly is a risky one. The young man went to great pains to use fake blood and could have also used a fake knife. As the decedent had previously been a U.S. Marine, he was certainly acquainted with the proper use and hazards of various weapons. Detailed social history was not available on this man but certainly this episode suggests a propensity for taking risks.

Risk taking as defined by Cohen is "embarking on a task without being certain of success" [1]. Certain behaviors have been linked to risk taking namely, gambling, russian roulette games, drug addiction, and parasuicide (attempted suicide). Evidence from accident research also suggests that not all accidents are chance events because certain individuals engage frequently in "accident prone" behaviors [2]. Thus, psychologically, this case might represent a subconscious form of "russian roulette" with a knife.

As mentioned previously, the decedent's left arm bore a tattoo stating "Born To Lose." Certainly this suggests some inclination to take risks or tempt fate. Although this man was a Marine that tattoo does not support the image of a military hero or of a "macho" male. Studies have shown a high frequency of tattoos in military or criminal populations of men [3]. The psychological significance of tattoos is complex. Tattoos such as "Born to raise hell" or "Born to lose" have been suggested to show antisocial tendencies. In light of this particular case, the decedent was apparently well liked and socially adept within his peer group. Certainly the words he used to express his surprise when he stabbed himself suggest he really did not believe he would lose the gamble he took when he placed the dagger against his chest. Unfortunately he did.

References

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