

CASE REPORT

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An Unsuccessful Murder

REFERENCE: Prathnadi, S., "An Unsuccessful Murder," *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, JFSCA, Vol. 28, No. 1, Jan. 1983, pp. 285-286.

ABSTRACT: The victim of an attempted murder, who was shot in the head by her husband, survived when the bullet failed to penetrate her skull, apparently because he had scored the bullet twice across its nose and used an outdated power charge. The husband succeeded in killing himself with a second shot.

KEYWORDS: pathology and biology, wound ballistics, homicide, suicide

On the night of 29 June 1981, an hour before midnight, people living in Sukumvit Road in Thailand's Prakanong District could have heard the sound of a gunshot coming from No. 38. It was dawn of the following day, however, before the Prakanong police were called in to investigate the incident, which was recorded as a typical murder-suicide.

At the scene, the police investigator found an injured woman, who was identified as the wife of the owner of the house. She had been shot right in the middle of her forehead, and was lying unconscious on the living room sofa, being held by her daughter. The husband was lying dead in an upstairs bedroom, holding a .38 Smith & Wesson revolver in his right hand; he had evidently shot himself in the mouth. The bullet entered his head in the upper part of the mouth and exited at the back of the head. Inside the cylinder of the pistol were found two spent cartridge cases and four rounds of unspent ammunition. A suicide note addressed to the daughter was also found.

The suicide and attempted murder apparently stemmed from financial difficulties. According to the note, the wife had mortgaged the house and the couple's business premises without her husband's knowledge to finance certain investments, which proved to be unsuccessful. The bank holding the mortgage had demanded repayment by the end of the month, and the man could see no way out of his financial bind other than to kill his wife and himself. The note was signed at 4:30 a.m., five hours after his first shot was fired.

At the request of the police investigator and the doctor who performed surgery on the woman, the Scientific Crime Detection Division of the Royal Thai Police became involved in the case. As the case was reconstructed, it seemed the woman was shot in her sleep. The husband then wrote the suicide note before turning the pistol on himself. The woman regained con-

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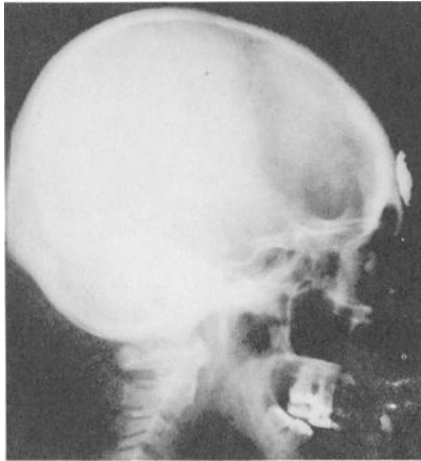


FIG. 1—An X-ray photograph reveals that the bullet did not penetrate the skull.

sciousness in the morning and was rushed to the hospital for surgery. The bullet, which had completely disappeared under the skin, was shown by X-rays to be lodged in the soft tissues just outside her skull, with its base pointing in the direction of its path. The nose of the bullet had flattened to conform to the contours of the skull (Fig. 1).

Examination of the recovered bullet revealed that its nose was scored in two directions, each cut passing through the center of the nose. Probably, the husband had modified the bullet so that it would explode upon impact, insuring his wife's instant death without suffering.

Gunshot residues were found inside the barrel of the revolver, as well as around the cylinder holding the two spent cartridge cases. Wax and grease, residues of the bullet lubricants, were found around the chamber holding the cartridge that had fired the first shot, indicating incomplete burning of the propellant powder. Propellant powder that burns completely leaves no such deposits: this was the case with the second bullet.

The forensic scientist investigating the case concluded that the woman was saved by an outdated power charge and the scores on the bullet's nose.

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