

CASE REPORT

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The Cutaneous Ink Sign: A Tipoff to Suicide or Suicide Notes

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ABSTRACT: The presence of smeared or unsmeared ink on the skin resulting from the writing process has been observed in a number of suicide victims who have left suicide notes. The authors report a case of a palmar "cutaneous ink sign" and discuss its forensic science import.

KEYWORDS: pathology and biology, suicide, inks, hands, suicide notes

Standard textbooks of forensic pathology emphasize the importance of examining the hands of suspected suicide victims, often to evaluate for the presence of supportive evidence that the decedent has held or discharged a gun. The finding of soot, pinch marks, gunpowder residue, high velocity blood spatter, trigger/trigger guard impressions, or patterned trace metal deposits on the hands of a decedent each supports the possibility of a self-destructive act [1-3]. The authors report an additional finding on the hands which may have forensic science import, particularly in reference to suicide, and independent of the weapon used.

Case Report

An adult individual committed suicide and left a suicide note which was written in blue ink. There were blue, smeared and unsmeared ballpoint ink pen marks on both hands, particularly on the palmar surfaces.

Discussion

The authors refer to the presence of smeared or unsmeared ink pen marks on the hands (usually on the palmar surfaces and the fingers) as the "cutaneous ink sign." We have seen this finding in a number of persons who committed suicide and left a suicide note written in

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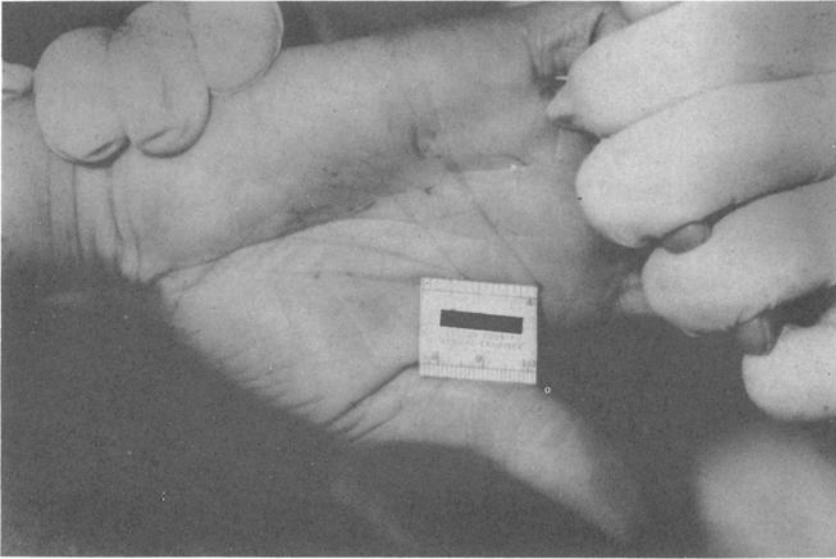


FIG. 1—Palmar cutaneous ink sign on hand of suicide victim. Similar ink marks may be seen on other body parts and the palmar variety is not an indicator of handedness. Such findings indicate recent writing and should suggest the presence of a suicide note.

ink. The ink sign is apparently not rare, and to our knowledge, has not been reported in the forensic science literature.

Figure 1 illustrates a palmar cutaneous ink sign, but the authors have seen several cases where ink has been found on the abdominal area as well, presumably transferred by inadvertent contact between the pen and abdomen or hands and abdomen. The ink sign has been observed on both hands of some individuals and thus is not an indicator of handedness.

The finding of a cutaneous ink sign only indicates contact with ink, and is obviously not specific for suicidal note writing. However, the presence of ink on the hands or skin of an individual who has died an unexplained death should arouse suspicions that suicide is a distinct possibility. Further, a cutaneous ink sign should also prompt a thorough search for a suicide note if circumstances are consistent with suicide and a note has not been searched for or found.

References

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