

CASE REPORT

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Investigation of Death Through Body Writing: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT: Various surfaces or substrates are often encountered in the examination of questioned writing; however, no writing is more interesting than that found on the human body nor more challenging when the writing in question is linked to a death investigation. The body of an 18-year-old male was brought to the State Crime Laboratory, Little Rock, Arkansas, with a gunshot wound to the head and several messages written on his arms and chest. This paper will discuss the examination of evidence used to determine the manner of death through a cooperative effort between the Medical Examiner's Section and the Questioned Document Section of the Crime Laboratory.

KEYWORDS: questioned documents, handwriting, postmortem examinations, suicide, body writing, unnatural death, hand printing identification, cutaneous ink sign

Homicides, accidents, and suicides are three types of unnatural deaths that are investigated by medical examiners. In deciding the cause and manner of such a death, medical examiners try to reconstruct how it happened. Through the autopsy, the body yields certain information that must be carefully interpreted by the medical examiner and considered along with other evidence associated with the deceased [1].

In this case report, the body of a young man yielded several visible messages. A bullet wound was present on the right side of the head and several hand printed words were written on both arms and on the chest. While notes left at a crime scene may not always provide conclusive evidence of how a death occurred, they do often provide the examiner with the identity of the writer, the intent of the writer, and information concerning the circumstances surrounding the death.

Case History

This 18-year-old boy had been previously living with his mother in California, before returning to Arkansas to live with his father two months prior to his death. He had found

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work at a nearby nuclear plant and had made a few friends, including the co-worker who was with him the night before he died. It was determined that he had a girlfriend named Becky, whom he had met since returning to live with his father. She had spoken to him by telephone three days earlier, and they had had an argument. She had tried to call him on two subsequent days, but could not make contact. He had telephoned her mother the day prior to his death.

When the father had last seen his son alive, he had arrived home around midnight. A friend and co-worker was there and the three of them talked and drank beer until 2:00 a.m., when the father left the son's room. The friend left the bedroom to go home around 3:00 a.m.

Later that morning, as the father prepared to leave for work, he noticed that his son's stereo was playing and the door was closed. That evening when he returned from work, he stated that the stereo was still playing when he went to bed.

The next morning, 32½ hours since he had last seen his son, the father checked his room and found the deceased in bed. Positioned horizontally across his neck was a shotgun. There was a shotgun wound to victim's right temple. His right hand was hanging down from the bed, while the left arm rested across his body. Messages written in red ink appeared on his chest and arms.

Some candles and other items suggesting possible cult or voodoo activities were found in the bedroom. Also present was a red felt-tip pen, an old coffee can, a plastic lid with red markings, and an empty bottle of tequila. Information supplied by the friend and co-worker indicated that the bottle had been opened, but most of its contents remained when the friend left the bedroom to go home. Subsequent investigation showed that the latent fingerprints developed on the bottle were those of the victim.

It was also determined that the gun belonged to the father, who usually kept it in his own bedroom. The friend stated that he had seen this gun a week earlier when he and the victim had gone fishing.

Since the position of the gun and the writing on the body was unusual, it was essential to determine whether the messages were written by the victim or by someone else who might have been present during or after the time of death.

Handprinting Examination

The process of comparison used to examine and identify the writing on the body in this case was the same as that used to determine whether any two writings were the same or different. Photographs were taken of the body so that the questioned writing could be arranged and compared with known standards. Since the questioned writing was written on a surface of the body that was easily accessible to the victim, hand printing samples from the employment records of the deceased were obtained for comparison (Fig. 1).

Upon examining the general appearance of the questioned messages, the forensic document examiners determined that the smoothness of the strokes and the delicate pressure exhibited at the beginning and ending strokes of letters, indicated that most of the writing was made normally and naturally in spite of the surface.

The position of some of the writing on the body did create the formation of a few awkward letter formations (Fig. 2). For example, the spacing between the horizontal lines in the letter "E" was uneven when the writing began to intersect with the left breast. The writing on the right forearm appeared to be written with an unpracticed hand. Exploring the possibility that the author of the messages could be the decedent, one can argue that the awkwardness of this printing could be explained if the victim was right-handed and had written this portion of the writing with his left hand. A reverse image of a question mark was noted on the right side of the rib cage. An explanation for this image could be that a right-handed person writing on the right side of his own body

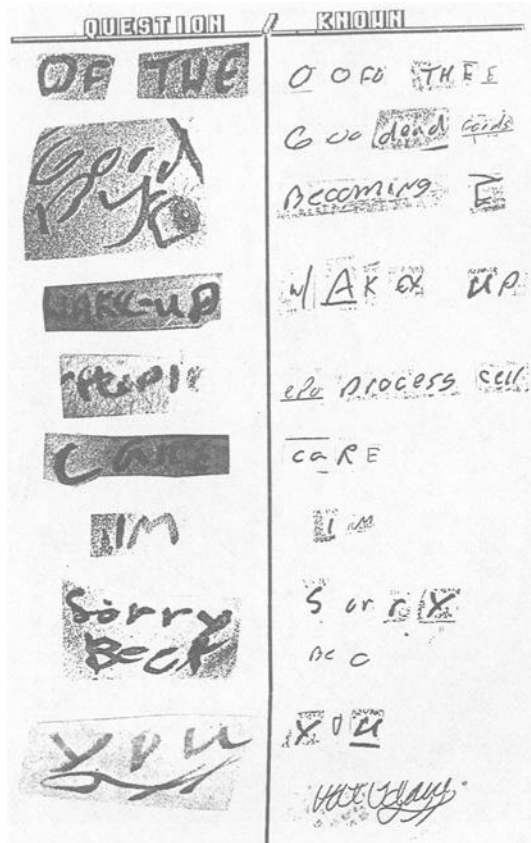


FIG. 1—Hand printing comparison chart, comparing samples of the victim's known writing with the writing on the body.

might make a mistake in constructing a question mark more easily than a person who was writing on someone else's body.

A study of the letter formations revealed several characteristics that were found in both the questioned and known hand printing of the deceased. The breaks present at the top and bottom of the "O" suggested that the writing movement exhibited in forming this letter was very similar to constructing open and closed parentheses in succession. The formation of the capital "G" was very similar to that of the Arabic numeral "6." The lower projection of the letter "P" was so short at times that it could be mistaken for the letter "D." The staff on the small "d" was frequently made in the formation of an inverted "v" (Fig. 1).

Another interesting characteristic peculiar to the decedent was his use of the "rubric" or "paraph." The rubric is a flourish under or after a name written as a signature, which in ancient times was a simple cross that later developed into a more elaborate design (Fig. 3). Some thought the rubric was an exhibition of vanity, but actually, it was customary. In some places, it was a common practice for a man to write his name and make his signature, which in essence was his rubric or trademark. Today, an extra stroke or flourish can still be found associated with signatures. Many consider them an added protection of a signature against forgery [2].

In reviewing known signatures of the deceased, it was observed that a rubric was

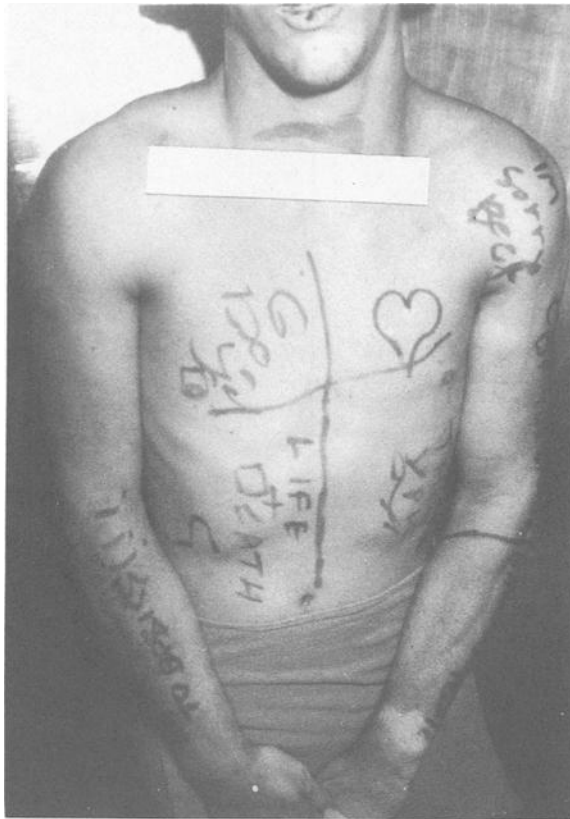


FIG. 2—The writing on the body.

present in all samples (Fig. 4). The rubric was formed as a stroke separate from the name itself. It began as a downstroke, formed a loop to the left, and ended in a long terminal stroke to the right. The long terminal stroke on the right side of the loop was then intersected by two independent strokes. The formation of this rubric was also found on the left side of the body after the words "Thank You." This suggested that the writer was using the rubric as a sign-off to the messages and possibly in place of his full signature because of the limited amount of space available.

Based on the characteristics discussed here and other evidence in the writing, an identification of the hand printing on the body was made with that of the deceased.



FIG. 3—Illustration of a rubric.

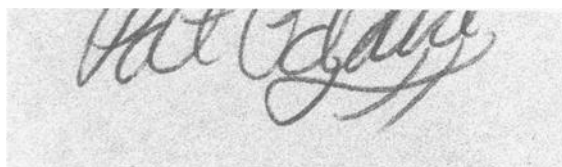


FIG. 4—*Rubric used by the decedent.*

Ink Examination

Samples of the writing medium was taken from the body with cotton swabs using alcohol, water, and ether. Specimens of ink came from letters within the text of the note on the body, as well as from the cutaneous ink sign on the victim's hands (Figs. 5 and 6). This ink sign, a term which refers to the smeared or unsmeared ink marks on the palmar surfaces and fingers of a victim, was an indicator that suicide was a distinct possibility [3].

These specimens were compared with ink taken from a red Berol felt-tip pen and from red markings on a plastic lid recovered at the crime scene. Thin-layer chromatography (TLC) was used as a rapid chemical technique to separate the organic components in the questioned and known samples. The results of the TLC indicated that the ink on the body came from the same formula as the ink found in the felt-tip marker and on the plastic lid.

Postmortem Examination

The victim had a contact wound with soot on the skin, muscle, and dura. Shot pellets were recovered from the damaged head and brain. Gunshot residues were found on swabs taken from the victim's right hand. Rust stains from the gun were present across the neck. Fractures were present in both anterior fossae, the left middle fossae, and the left and right posterior fossae.

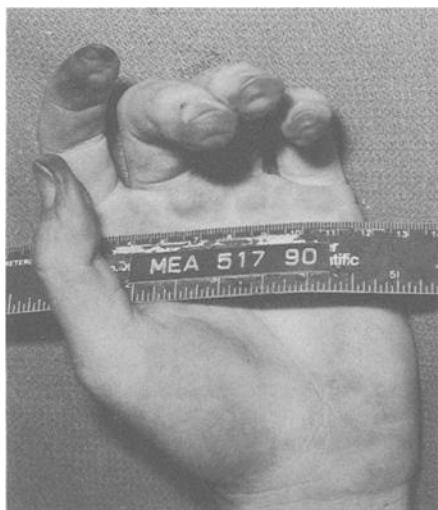


FIG. 5—*Cutaneous ink sign on left hand.*

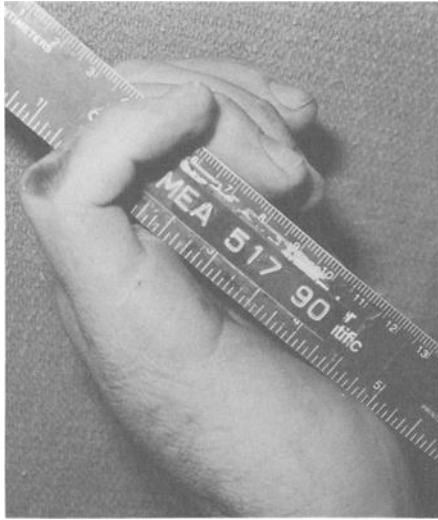


FIG. 6—Cutaneous ink sign on right hand.

The blood ethanol content of the deceased was 590 mg/dL (0.59 g%), with ethanol values of 0.22 g% in bile, 0.20 g% in urine, and 0.22 g% in vitreous humor. Repeat testing confirmed this toxic level.

Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the identification of the writing on the body with that of the victim, and the results of the autopsy, the preliminary findings were that the manner of death was suicide. However, the characteristics of the suicide note (that is, the writing on the body) and the relationship of the note to the final act of self-violence needed to be considered [4]. Therefore, additional information was sought concerning the circumstances surrounding the last hours of the young man's life.

Expressions of remorse and statements of warning and farewell were contained within the text of the messages. Those sentiments seemed to agree with the accounts that he and his girlfriend had argued, and that on the eve of his death there had been discussions with his father about entering the military and talk of voodooism and chanting for peace with his friend. His expression of "LIFE + DEATH" illustrated in the note seemed to reflect the discussions and events that occurred during the last few hours of his life.

This case was ruled a suicide. The determination that the messages written on the body were in the victim's own handwriting was essential to the determination of the manner of death, and allowed the completion of the investigation into this youth's untimely death.

A search of American literature from 1966 to the present (1991) did not reveal any other documentation of suicide notes written on the victim's own body.

Acknowledgment

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