Letters to the Editor

Commentary on, "Autoerotic Fatalities With Power Hydraulics," (*J. Forensic Sci.*, Vol. 38, No. 2, March 1993, pp. 359-364)

Dear Sir:

The paper by Dietz and O'Halloran deserves comment on three issues.

1. In this paper, the point is made that only in recent years has autoeroticism come to be recognized, and the deaths are finally being correctly labelled "Accidents" rather than bizarre suicides. There is allusion to a risk-taking element in this practice and to the danger-loving character of the protagonist in Case #1.

It has been my experience as a medical examiner for 25 years that the circumstances in most of these cases suggest elements of depression, self-destructiveness, and failure to insure adequate escape mechanism. It can thus be argued that at least some of these deaths (suspension, or extremely restrictive bondage) are similar in nature to Russian Roulette, and are more properly labelled "Manner Undetermined" (as is my practice).

2. While Case #2 is unquestionably an accident (unless perhaps his wife came upon him and decided to end it), Case #1 appears more like a suicide.

Although there was some evidence for a sentimental attachment to his machine, no cross-dressing features are seen. A fondness for a mechanical object is not at all unusual, as is giving a name to a machine, and such a practice has never been labelled auto-eroticism or pathological in any way. The man was suffering from a progressive crippling disease, had no spouse or offspring and may well have been depressed. The elaborate device he set up may have been designed to lethally suspend him by the neck after he was overcome by carbon monoxide. He could only have achieved the 37 percent saturation level of carbon monoxide outside in the open air by ducting the exhaust to his airways, the device used for this having been presumably removed or somehow missed by investigators. Elaborate suicidal devices such as this have been occasionally described in the literature, and are probably the work of Rube-Goldberg type frustrated inventors.

One additional possibility should be considered. As a professional with his own "successful business," life insurance was probably a significant factor in his estate. The imperilment of this policy by a suicide verdict may have played a part in re-arrangement of the scene and re-orchestration of his lifestyle. With the widespread dissemination of information about auto-erotic deaths, we should be on the alert for suicide or homicide scenes which have been planned or altered to resemble auto-erotic deaths.

3. The proliferation of papers concerning auto-erotic deaths seems to reflect a questionable preoccupation with a prurient and sensational subject, rather than a reasonable concern about a significant, unresolved, problem in our society, worthy of our unremitting attention and offering a genuine opportunity for therapy or prophylaxis to prevent these occasional deaths. In view of the extreme rarity (true rarity, rather than apparent rarity due to lack of detection) of these deaths and their usually obvious presentation to even the casual observer, the emphasis on this subject in educational materials for death investigation is an indication of the morbid fascination which attaches to the subject.

As professionals with far more justifiable axes to grind (such as movements for effective firearm control, automobile safety, or fire-safe cigarettes) we should place less emphasis on such sensational trivia as auto-eroticism and satanism.

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Author's Response:

Dear Sir:

Dr. Contostavlos raises three good points to consider in investigating and reporting autoerotic fatalities. It is true that many autoerotic asphyxial deaths may involve people with varying degrees of depression and may involve known risk taking behavior. As we mentioned in our article, the perception of danger may be part of the sexual deviation. The evidence of repetition in the reported cases (by history from relatives and by scene inference in both cases), the lack of any prior expression of depression or suicidal ideation, and the bizarre circumstances of both cases make them unlikely to be suicides. Multiple investigators were at the scene in case #1; there was no ducting of exhaust fumes to the victim's airway. Though one might be tempted to equate autoerotic asphyxial deaths with Russian Roulette after the fact, the perceived and real risk of a fatal outcome does not appear nearly as great as putting a loaded gun to one's head and pulling the trigger. We believe classifying most autoerotic deaths as accidents is appropriate, but good death investigators should always consider suicide and homicide as possibilities in any traumatic death.

The concern about the perceived prurient nature of published reports of autoerotic deaths is harder to address. On the one hand Dr. Contostavlos indicates that autoerotic asphyxia is "a significant, unresolved problem in our society," but, on the other hand, he doesn't want it discussed in scientific journals. We believe that educating death investigators has helped decrease the frequency of misdiagnosing autoerotic accidental deaths as suicides and homicides; sparing individuals, families and communities undue accusations or feelings of guilt.

We, as scientists and physicians, will never know the true epidemiology of the autoerotic death problem until death investigators learn to recognize such cases for what they are and certify them as such. Reporting variations from the classic syndrome serves an educational function. If problems are not considered, just because they have sexual overtones, then solutions may never be found.

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Electronic Communication in Forensic Sciences

Dear Sir:

I would like to urge the readers to respond to the E-mail Survey published in the January issue of the AAFS newsletter. I believe the time has come, in fact it is long overdue, for the forensic community to join the electronic communication revolution which is going on in the world around us. For those not familiar with the potential of computer communication I would like to present some of the benefits which are available now or will be available shortly to the majority of forensic scientists. I would also like to examine some of the

issues which managers and directors of forensic laboratories will have to face as the electronic integration of the forensic community occurs.

The ability to communicate between computers via the modem has existed for some time. As more and more computers entered industry and academia the amount of communication increased dramatically. Computers became connected in arrays called networks so that communication efficiency increased until today millions of computers are connected together in the Internet. A full discussion of the history and development of the Internet and its services are beyond the scope of this discussion and are published in several good books which are recommended reading. The result of all this connectivity is that there is an almost unlimited amount of information available over the computer, from library card catalogs at dozens of universities, databases of information in industry and academia, recreational bulletin boards, and a lot more. One of the most significant services is electronic mail.

Electronic mail is the ability to send a message from one computer to another. What is required is network connection and a computer address, which are available from a variety of sources; governmental, educational, and commercial. Most network providers, even those with proprietary networks, give each account an address to send and receive mail with the rest of the electronic world. Regardless of which other services the user has on the network, there is the ability to send and receive E-mail. Providers of such network services include, but are not limited to, America On Line, Compuserve, Prodigy, Genie, Delphi, MCImail, Netcom, and many others. These organizations provide an assortment of services other than E-mail on their own network, as well as certain Internet services, and others provide full or partial Internet connections only. The important part is the ability to send and receive mail.

Electronic mail will be a major benefit to forensic scientists. First it enables the scientist to sent a message to any connected colleague merely by typing it and sending it on its electronic way, no stamps, no getting lost, etc. It's faster than surface mail, sometimes appearing across the country in seconds. It is possible to send the same message to many people at once. This is even easier with the use of a mailing list. A mailing list is a central address where all messages are sent and redistributed to every member on the list. The list could be laboratories or individual scientists across the country or around the world, who all read and respond to the same messages. The messages may range from questions about how to approach types of casework, questions about research and developing techniques, job announcements, conference announcements, and any other message which might otherwise be sent in mass mailing. The potential to query possibly hundreds of other scientists and experts about research, techniques, and casework strategies, and have answers back sometimes the same day is boggling. This can save countless hours of library searching, research, and experimentation which somebody else may have already done and is eager and waiting to discuss. Much in house and informal research has never been published and would be useful to the forensic community in this format. As the group grows it will be able to be divided by topic to reduce the volume in topics the scientist does not want to read.

The ability to form this kind of electronic on-line forum already exists. All that is necessary is for an organization such as AAFS to take the initiative and establish the list, and solicit subscribers, persons and laboratories with E-mail addresses who wish to participate in this type of forum. I believe that the potential is enormous. But there will be some possible obstacles to overcome along the way. Obviously it will be important to not discuss sensitive information. At first the readership may be low and it will be important to encourage membership and participation so that the potential benefits may be realized. Other difficulties will be in the network administration at the various laboratories.

As laboratory computing grows there is the natural tendency to form internal networks until the entire laboratory is working from one integrated computer network incorporating clerical functions, evidence tracking, analysis, quality assurance, workload management, and report generation. Along with this now comes the need to establish ties with the outside

network. The modern forensic science laboratory needs the skills of a true computer and network administrator. Laboratory management will also have to decide how much time which analysists spend monitoring the forensic network traffic for useful information for their programs. I can speak from experience that once engaged in this type of ongoing exchange of information the time commitment can be significant.

These challenges lay ahead of us. We may choose to solve them and reap what I think will be a bountiful reward in increased communication, or we may shirk them and lose out on the advantages of living in the midst of an information revolution. I believe this type of networking is inevitable. The sooner we act, the sooner we can experience the benefits.

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