

BRIEF COMMUNICATION

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Three Cases of Fatal Firearm Use Following External Hinge Removal from Locked Gun Cabinets

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ABSTRACT: In order to potentially decrease the number of homicides and suicides that result from firearms, one must decrease the accessibility of guns. We describe three cases that were obtained from the Onondaga County Medical Examiners Office in New York that occurred between January 1990 to March 1993. In two suicides and a double homicide, firearms were quietly obtained from commercially manufactured locked gun cabinets by removing the door hinges, which were located on the outside of the cabinet, with a screwdriver.

The incidence of obtaining firearms by this method is not known. No other similar cases are reported in the literature. Removing hinges that are placed on the outside of the cabinet may be a common method of obtaining firearms to commit either homicide or suicide in the home, but perhaps not recognized. More information is needed. If additional cases are identified, then prevention in terms of gun cabinet design, may save lives in the future.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, gun cabinet, hinge, homicide, suicide

Approximately 60% of suicides and 63% of homicides in the United States involve firearms (1). Access to firearms is one of the leading risk factors to both homicide and suicide in this country. It has formerly been concluded that the physical presence of a gun in the home was a significant risk factor for suicidal patients rather than the type of gun used, the mode of storage, or whether the weapon was kept locked or unlocked with ammunition (2).

We would like to propose that the construction and design of the cabinets may be a risk factor for fatalities independent of whether the gun cabinets are locked because the cases presented demonstrate that firearms can be obtained just as quietly and easily from locked gun cabinets.

The following three cases illustrate how a weapon was obtained from a gun cabinet by removing the external door hinges with a screwdriver. In two of the three cases, other family members were present in the home and could have possibly prevented the

homicide or suicide if noise had been produced, such as breaking glass or splintering wood, indicating that the gun cabinet was no longer secure.

Case 1

P.F. was a 18-year-old white male with a long history of obsessive compulsive disorder and underlying depression. His current medication included tricyclic antidepressants. He was at various times noncompliant because of his concern about drug side effects. On the day of the shooting, his father had been working when he returned home to find a gun missing from the gun cabinet. He ran to his son's bedroom where he found P.F. lying dead on the floor with a bloody cardboard box over his head and a gun beside him. There was a penetrating gunshot wound to the head. Scene investigation revealed a screwdriver on the floor next to the gun cabinet. The cabinet door hinges had been removed leaving the lock intact.

Case 2 (Double Homicide)

S.R. was a 21-year-old white male who lived with his parents and a younger brother following separation from his wife. There was a history of a "nervous breakdown" and spousal abuse. S.R. had a past medical history of paranoid schizophrenia, but had been noncompliant with his medication for several days prior to the shooting. On the day of the shooting his parents argued with him for not taking his medication. S.R. proceeded downstairs and unscrewed the hinges from a locked gun cabinet to obtain a rifle. He loaded five rounds and called for his father to come downstairs, whereupon, he fatally shot both his mother and father. Scene investigation showed the hinges removed from the gun cabinet and a screwdriver on an adjacent counter top.

Case 3

T.S. was a 15-year-old white male who lived with his parents and younger brother, and had a history of "mood swings," which was attributed to insulin dependent diabetes mellitus. The day of the shooting, a neighbor called his residence to complain that T.S. had taken her credit card in order to purchase a telephone at a local store. An argument ensued between T.S. and his mother in which she wanted T.S. to devise a plan to repay the neighbor for the credit card charges. Later that evening, T.S. poured turpentine into an aquarium killing his fish. Shortly after his parents retired

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to bed they heard a loud bang. They ran to their son's bedroom and found him lying on the floor with a fatal gunshot wound to the head. Scene investigation revealed a note on his desk describing his death as his "plan" for repaying his neighbor. A screwdriver was located on the floor about three feet in front of the gun cabinet. The outside door hinges had been removed and the lock was undisturbed.

Discussion

Properly storing firearms to restrict access may be one solution to decreasing the number of homicides and suicides that result from guns. A literature search found in no other articles that pertained to the number of homicides or suicides that have been committed by obtaining guns from a locked gun cabinet by removing external hinges. The prevalence and incidence of obtaining firearms in the manner described in this article may be frequently overlooked and therefore go unreported. Even though storage of guns in a locked gun cabinet has not been shown to be effective in preventing homicide and suicide (2), storage in a well constructed gun cabinet may be a deterrent.

The gun cabinets in all three of these cases were, designed for storage of firearms and are currently available in gun shops and department stores. Many commercially constructed gun cabinets doors are mounted with a secure, non-removable hinge with a hinge pin and internal screws. However, there are many manufactured gun cabinets available with external door hinges. Currently, there are no regulations or guidelines concerning design and construction of commercial gun cabinets.

For various reasons many families are reluctant to remove firearms from the home. The most common reason for keeping a loaded gun in the home is for self protection (3). However, firearms in the home are much more likely to cause the death of a family member, an acquaintance, or the firearm owner themselves, rather

than an intruder (3–5). If families insist on keeping handguns readily available for protection against intruders, a commercially available handgun "vault" with an easy access finger combination lock can be utilized. Long guns should be stored in metal vaults or safes with a combination lock for maximum security.

The three cases presented illustrate how external hinges of locked gun cabinets were quietly opened with a screwdriver, without disturbing or alerting other family members who could have potentially prevented the homicide or suicide. Until further data are available, based on these cases, we feel that proper construction of gun cabinets should contain internal door hinges to decrease access of firearms. In the future, it may be important to assess the construction of the cabinets in the homes of victims known to have accessed a gun cabinet to obtain their weapon to identify potential life threatening flaws in their design.

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