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The Medical Examiner and Suicide: How Much Publicity Should Result From His Investigation?

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Deaths from suicide constitute a surprisingly large segment of the deaths in any community, exceeding motor vehicle fatalities, deaths from carcinoma of the rectum, or deaths from malignancy of the uterus. There is little question that almost all (if not all) of the deaths by suicide represent, in reality, deaths from mental disease.

The medico-legal investigator, regardless of title, is directed by law to investigate all violent, sudden, unexpected, and suspicious deaths. These include the suicides. Some of these cannot be determined as suicides because of the nature of the deaths, the lack of information as to the state of mind of the deceased, or the absence of a note or other indication as to the victim's intention.

The purpose of any medico-legal investigation, in the broadest sense, is to protect the "public interest." This means primarily to uncover unsuspected homicides, to document for court the obvious homicides, and to protect the innocent from unjust treatment before the bar of justice. Other purposes derive from these primary objectives. These are adequate and proper certification of medico-legal deaths, indirectly settling accident insurance claims, and uncovering industrial, public and domestic hazards to health.

The medico-legal investigator must issue a death certificate after his investigation just as the private physician in attendance at a "natural" death. The death certificate is a so-called public document which is on file in various municipal and state offices. This is available to anyone, including members of the press.

The publicizing of suicidal deaths varies from place to place. The author feels that suicide is a death from mental disease, a severe symptom or manifestation of mental illness and should not be reported in a sensational manner and, indeed, not reported by the press in any way other than in an obituary.

A few years ago I had occasion, as chief medical examiner, to investigate the suicidal death of an elderly woman who, late in life, had developed a depression. In her earlier years she had been an outstanding member of her community and had made many contributions to society as an educator. In her obituary in the local press, all of her contributions and memberships in various societies and associations were listed. Down near the end of the account it was indicated that the medical examiner listed the death as a suicide. What a pity that this was included in such a fine tribute! If she had succumbed to carcinoma or even luetic aortitis such a condition would not have been reported by the press.

Why a suicide?

When the means of a bizarre suicide are reported, more of the same will follow in fairly short order. Such a series occurred several years ago when, much as the recent Viet Nam Buddhist monks, a man ignited himself after soaking his clothing with kerosene oil. Two other cases followed in rapid succession. The series of stranglings in greater Boston, now being reported in the press in such great detail, may well be the acts of a number of deranged persons stimulated by the publicity rather than acts of "the strangler."

In about the middle of my tenure as chief medical examiner an official of one of the larger newspapers in my area committed suicide. His death occurred in a hospital several days after his act and this information was not made available to the reporter who usually collected such information. As a result, the newspaper's editors were embarrassed by their failure to report the death of their official as a suicide. The managing editor called me and told me of their feelings and I indicated strongly that I felt no suicides should be written up as such. He told me he would take the matter up with the editorial board and let me know the result. His call came several days later advising me the board had decided to stop reporting suicidal deaths as such unless they were committed in the public view or in such a way as to make the reporting necessary for public information.

This they did and it made life easier for me and, I am sure, much easier for the surviving family and friends of suicides. The Church could give victims the benefit of the doubt in burial without fear of scandal and families could better cope with young members when the true nature of the deaths remained more private. As a result I am sure the interests of the community were better served.

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