

To: Dawn Zulauf, Chief Investigator

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**Re: Suicide Deaths by Inhalation of Helium,
Related to the Recent News of the Final Exit Organization**

Recently, the Final Exit Organization has made headlines throughout the country. In particular, this has been the subject of some discussion on the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators' Listserv. Additionally, I recently presented a question to the List, and the answers I received from around the country were quite interesting. I thought that I would share some of this information with you, to possibly pass it along to other investigators.

Of recent note, members of the Final Exit Organization were indicted on charges of conspiracy, destruction of evidence, and racketeering in Cobb County. Apparently, they have changed their participation in the act when someone commits suicide by removing most, if not all, evidence that the Final Exit Organization was involved. For example, in cases where a helium tank and a hood are used (where the hood is placed over the person's head, or in fewer cases, the person is placed into a large bag, helium is pumped in, and the person dies from the displacement of oxygen when they inhale only helium), members of the Organization leave the scene with the hood, helium tank, and any written materials from Final Exit.

The question I posed to the List was, in a situation like that where all physical evidence has been removed, what other clinical signs might the investigator notice or identify on the body. Without any clinical signs, especially in an older decedent, such a death might not be recognized as a suicide but rather misclassified as natural. Additionally, for field investigators, any clinical signs would need to be specifically asked about by the investigator when speaking with law enforcement and hospital personnel. The responses I received from my question were quite interesting.

First, I was surprised to hear how many of these deaths were investigated by various medical examiner and coroner offices throughout the country. In fact, I received responses from somewhat rural and out-of-the way jurisdictions, mentioning that they sometimes see as many as 2-3 per month. Additionally, they mentioned that they have seen fewer cases recently where physical evidence remained at the scene.

The general consensus was that there will be very few clinical signs on the body, and in fact, even an autopsy would not generally reveal that the death was caused by inhalation of helium gas. However, there were some very noteworthy observations that were seen

in many Final Exit deaths. It was noted that, because the decedent would sweat profusely when covered by the hood or the bag, signs of heavy sweating would be noted on the body (such as damp clothing, hair, and the like). Additionally, other investigators noted fine beads of sweat in the nostrils, for example attached to nose hairs. Ligature marks may also be found on the neck where the hood was placed over the decedent's head, but this is not always seen. Similarly, if the hood or bag was secured with tape, some of the sticky residue might be noted on the skin. Of course, speaking with family and getting a social history and background, are also very important. But these may be the only clues available, as the most important clues, i.e., physical evidence, may have been removed.

It is my understanding that, because most lab equipment is actually calibrated *with* helium, they will not detect the presence of helium in the tissues. There will also not be any particular presentation of the decedent's skin color (for example, with carbon monoxide deaths, you would expect to see a cherry-red color). Rather, the general experiences from the List show that presentation is rather normal. For field investigators, if they do not specifically request that hospital or law enforcement personnel press the family for social, past medical, psychiatric, and other relevant history, as well as to be on the lookout for evidence of profuse sweating, ligature marks, or tape residue, these deaths might very well be misclassified as natural and simply not investigated further.

I hope that this will help to disseminate useful information to other investigators, especially if they were previously unaware of the Final Exit Organization and have not received the benefit of the ABMDI Listserv. Please contact me if I can be of assistance to you in the future.