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# POLICE SCIENCE

## MOTOR VEHICULAR SUICIDES

RICHARD FORD AND A. L. MOSELEY

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Suicide by the instrumentality of vehicles has long been accorded medicolegal recognition. For centuries depressed persons have thrown themselves beneath the wheels of chariots, wagons, rapid transit trains, railroad engines, trucks, busses, and, latterly, automobiles. Aircraft have been destroyed in the course of self-destruction sometimes accompanied by mass murder.

The body wedged beneath the train in the urban transit station pit always presents a problem. Death may be suicidal, homicidal, or accidental. Deliberate pushing; crowd pressure; sudden incapacitation by disease, medication, or alcohol; instability due to deformity, confusion, dizziness, and vertigo; and even tripping are to be considered. Intoxication may reflect incapacitation and therefore accident or, on the contrary, false courage and deliberate intent.

The free ranging motor vehicle greatly expands the problem of the manner of death of the pedestrian and adds the driver who intentionally misdirects his car. There is a stubborn determination on the part of many investigating officials to ascribe the cause of traffic fatalities either to speed, incompetence, or to excessive use of alcohol. Two cardinal reasons exist for this attitude: laziness and ignorance of possibilities. Bad highway engineering, vehicular failure, physical incapacitation, and intent are rarely considered—much less explored. Since suicide does occur beneath railroad, subway, and elevated trains, then suicide is also achieved and attempted beneath trucks, busses, and automobiles.

*Case 1.* At seven o'clock in the morning a 35-year old married father of two children, former police officer, and part owner of a tavern in serious financial difficulties, threw himself down in front

of a moving public transportation bus. The alert driver stopped in time, leaped out, and seized the man who broke away, ran to a car, and drove off. The registration number of the car was recorded. At 7:20 a.m. occupants of a three-story, flat roofed apartment building heard the sound of feet climbing an outside stairway, running across the roof and then a thud from the street. A man lay dead with his head crushed on the center line of the roadway, twenty feet from the wall of the building. Parked on the adjacent side street was his automobile with the registration plates bearing the same number recorded by the bus driver twenty minutes earlier. The family physician had urged psychiatric treatment of a profound depression.

*Case 2.* A 26-year old married dentist, ground between the millstones of domineering wife and possessive mother, was seen to crash at high speed into a bridge abutment. From the demolished vehicle a freshly fired revolver was recovered. In the right temple, one half inch anterior and superior to the external auditory meatus, there was a contact gunshot wound. An exit wound was present in the left parietal region. Smoke residue was visible upon the right thumb and forefinger. Fractures of mandible, cervical spine, and femurs were designated as postmortem.<sup>1</sup>

*Case 3.* Wedged through the guard rail on the side of a bridge over a river was the car of an Army sergeant. Injured but conscious he soon blurted out that he had "strangled" his wife and had intended suicide. His wife's body was found at home in a pool of blood covered with her raincoat. A knife was at her side. Multiple stab wounds of the neck caused an incised wound of her common

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication: Dr. Jack Mickley, Medical Examiner, Broward County, Hollywood, Florida.

carotid artery. The sergeant had been away until three weeks before the quarrel; the woman was six weeks pregnant and demanded divorce. Two days later after employing legal counsel he denied all previous admissions.

These three cases depict the not uncommon multiple method of suicide, vehicular use being unsuccessful in two and unnecessary in the other. Variants include jumping from bridge or overpass into the path of oncoming vehicles, thereby insuring double impacts, and the driving of cars into the path of railroad trains and into the sea.

The documentation of suicide by motor vehicle in the absence of a declaration of intention or a written statement differs little from establishing self-destruction by other means. The circumstances of the scene of the injuries and the antecedent events may furnish the explanation of the death.

*Case 4.* A 20-year old single woman was found dead at the wheel of a car jammed head-on against the trunk of a tree. Tire tracks 90 feet in length led from the high speed lane of the divided highway in a straight line to the tree. On leaving the road the vehicle crossed a snow bank at an angle of 50 degrees. The path of the vehicle indicated no braking, and the damage reflected only moderate speed estimated at 30 m.p.h. The dead driver wore a summer coat, pajamas, brassiere, socks, and bedroom slippers. The environmental temperature was 20° F. with wind gusts of 20 m.p.h. The decedent died from thoracic impact against the unrecessed steering wheel. She had long been emotionally labile, manifested in part by obesity. Immediately prior to her final trip, she participated in a family quarrel and left home in a rage. Relatives pursued her and arrived at the death scene prior to police. It may be argued that this young woman intended only a grand gesture and not a successful suicide. Her unswerving collision course, however, showed only intent without avoidance maneuvers. Similar in many respects though unsuccessful in effecting death is the following.

*Case 5.* A 35-year old single woman in a grossly disturbed state of mind was found alone behind the wheel of her car in a dense thicket of scrub growth on a mountain side 353 feet downhill from the highway. At a speed estimated to have been 80 m.p.h., the car left the road, traversed a scenic parking area, crashed through a steel and

wooden fence, dropped nine feet into second growth saplings, and finally stopped as momentum was slowed by the vegetation. Injury to the car front by the fence, flattening of the front tires by the nine-foot fall, and one break in the horn ring by thoracic impact was the extent of vehicular damage. No glass was broken. Roentgenography of the driver showed only healing fractures correlating with a previous suicide attempt by jumping from a third-story window. Information was obtained from the family that her father had killed himself by driving down a mountain side.

Only two instances of suicide notes written by pedestrians who attempted by jumping in front of vehicles have been encountered.

*Case 6.* A 30-year old single man ran erratically in front of a fast-moving line of six automobiles on a lonely country road past the hour of midnight. Exhibiting remarkable driving agility, all six drivers avoided him. Police were summoned, searched the pedestrian, and found a note in his pocket which stated his intention of self-destruction by means of a moving car. Sexual deviation, alcoholism, and heavy financial indebtedness were among his personal problems.

*Case 7.* The second case with a suicide note was a 19-year old college student who, on a Sunday morning stood behind a concrete overpass abutment gauging the speed of traffic. With accurate timing he ran out, was struck and carried on the hood, and by a panic stop was flung upon a grass plot. Only moderately injured, he admitted to police that his action was planned and deliberate. In his dormitory room his farewell note was found;

—————College  
February 20, 1960

To My Fellowmen:

. . . I find it impossible to suggest a reason for my abnormal development. I only know that it has affected every idea of my being. I would challenge any psychiatrist or theologian, if I were yet alive, to locate by any means one goal which I may accept as a purpose in life. God can use me no longer here on earth; I am better able to accomplish something in His name by leaving this life. I believe that God has sanctioned my suicide.

.....

Somewhere in the pages of literature are these words: "Nothing so became his life as the leaving of it."

The arbitrary selection of an unsuspecting fellow

man as his executioner we do not consider to be altruistic in any respect. The most that can be said for these two men is that if successful the drivers would have avoided criminal prosecution. Two homosexual males thus attempted suicide by running in front of automobiles, each leaving notes expressing reasons and intent.

Tender years do not exclude thoughts of self-destruction, though comprehension of the meaning of death is surely open to question.

*Case 8.* A 7-year-old boy was under psychiatric treatment. His dog, his only playmate, was killed three weeks before, run over by a truck. He had been told that his grandmother, who died a year before, had gone away to heaven. He expressed a wish himself to run in front of a truck to join both dog and grandmother. His father, informed of the extent of the grief, soon purchased the boy a new animal.

Impossible of proof but suggesting intent is the following provocative example:

*Case 9.* A 60-year-old married male died of head injury sustained at 3:00 a.m., the hour of least traffic flow, when he walked into the side of a passing automobile. Dust wiping and surface dents proved the lateral contact. Postmortem examination showed carcinoma of the body and tail of the pancreas with "carcinomatosis peritonei." Three years before, diagnosis had been made by explora-

tory laparotomy. Each night his widow said he walked about the city sleepless and despairing. Was his death uncontrived or skillfully managed with an eye to personal liability insurance for the benefit of his widow?

#### SUMMARY

Nine cases of contemplated, attempted, and completed suicide using the instrumentality of the motor vehicle have been presented. Acute or chronic emotional disturbance has been documented or reasonably inferred in each instance. Drivers and pedestrians have been the principals in the cases investigated thus far. Case 4 and Case 9 are representative of driver and pedestrian deaths without written or verbal statements of intent and indicate the difficulties in the establishment of legal proof.

#### CONCLUSIONS

1. Suicide by motor vehicle occurs among drivers and pedestrians.
2. Recognition of traffic suicides and suicidal attempts depends upon the finding of notes, survival statements, examination of the scene, and anamnestic data.
3. Pedestrians making suicide attempts are indifferent to the effect on the driver.
4. No passenger suicides have yet been recognized.