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## Officers lack training to judge suicide notes: research

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Police in Canada lack sufficient training to judge the veracity of suicide notes — and a failure to make accurate decisions in such cases could result in “miscarriages of justice” and the “waste of valuable resources on unnecessary criminal investigations,” according to an article published in the latest edition of the Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Brent Snook, an associate professor of psychology at Memorial University in Newfoundland, says research has shown there are some reliable cues that can help police determine whether a suicide note is real or fake. For instance, the use of affectionate words — such as “dear” or “darling” or “love you” — is one indicator a suicide note is probably genuine.

But Snook said there is presently no standard protocol in the country for investigators to assess suicide notes. “I would say officers are just required to have a look at it — how do they think this is?” he said in an interview.

In 2008, a Newfoundland man made national headlines when he was arrested two years after he faked his own suicide.

Bruce Leyte had vanished in August 2006, leaving behind a suicide note in his abandoned truck parked at the Humber River near Corner Brook. The disappearance prompted a search in the river that lasted for days.

As it turned out, Leyte, who had been struggling financially, had moved to B.C. where he lived under a different identity before moving back to Newfoundland.

Leyte subsequently pleaded guilty to public mischief and fraud-related charges, and was sentenced to 28 months in jail.

For the past several years, the parents of 22-year-old John Connelly, who died in 2001 after falling from his apartment building in Toronto, have insisted their son’s death was a homicide and not a suicide, as police had ruled.



Bruce Leyte, originally from Corner Brook, used a suicide note to fake his own death in 2006. In an article published in the latest edition of the Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice researchers say police officers in Canada lack the required amount of training to determine authenticity of suicide notes. — Transcontinental file photo

In November, parents John and Gloria Connelly, of Ottawa, appealed to the Ontario chief coroner to order an inquest. According to experts hired by the family, parts of a suicide note may have been forged.

The chief coroner is still deciding whether to hold an inquest, a spokeswoman said Tuesday. “When presented with an equivocal death, accurately determining whether it is a homicide, suicide, or accidental death is essential to ensuring justice is done as well as to preventing police organizations from wasting valuable resources on unnecessary criminal investigations,” Snook wrote in the article. In a study, Snook presented a group of officers with 66 samples of suicide notes — 33 were genuine, 33 were fake — and asked the officers to judge the authenticity of each note.

The officers were right about half the time. “They may as well have flipped a coin,” Snook said. Snook also found when officers assessed the suicide notes, they tended to rely on factors that aren’t very good predictors of authenticity. He said officers tended to look at whether the suicide notes contained expressions of doubt, uncertainty or regret, and whether the notes contained reasons for committing suicide.

Research has shown that there are other, more reliable, factors that can help determine whether a suicide note is real or not. Craig Bennell, an associate professor of psychology at Carleton University, has found that genuine suicide notes typically contain words of affection, endearment or gratitude toward loved ones. Genuine suicide notes also tend to contain more succinct sentences. “They’ve come to terms with what they’re going to do,” Bennell said of such notes’ authors. When Bennell trained his students to assess the veracity of suicide notes using these cues, their accuracy increased by about 20 per cent.

Retired RCMP Const. Duncan Chisholm, who was the lead investigator in the Newfoundland case involving Leyte, acknowledged in an interview that officers often rely on their instincts when determining the veracity of suicide notes. Chisholm said he was suspicious of Leyte’s suicide note as soon as he read it. One thing that jumped out was the fact that Leyte addressed his common-law wife but not his children.

In the days following the discovery of the note, police also learned that Leyte’s cellphone was still in use, Chisholm said, which cast further doubts about a suicide.

Still, an intensive search was launched, involving the coast guard, RCMP and other teams. Family members, who genuinely believed Leyte had jumped into the water, insisted that authorities keep searching when no body was found, Chisholm said. “You’re caught between a rock and hard place,” he said. Rob Vermeulen, an RCMP spokesman, said he wasn’t aware of any training specifically related to suicide notes. The department welcomes suggestions for additional training, he said.