JUSTICE

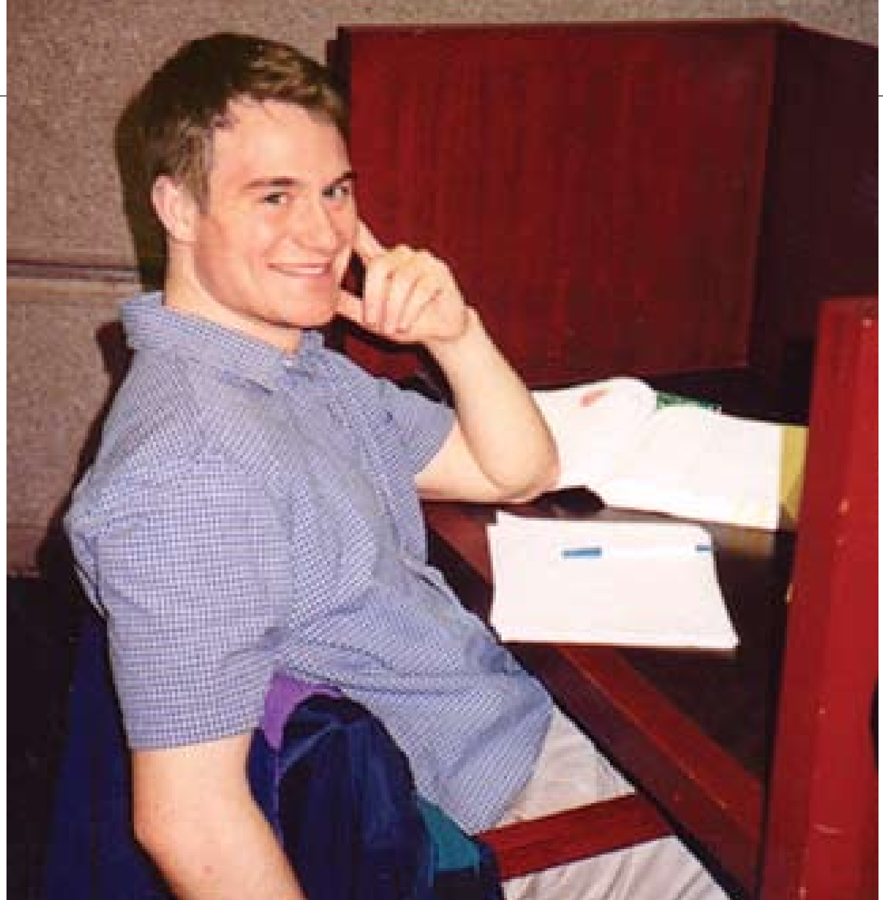
WHAT IF IT WASN'T REALLY SUICIDE?

New research shows police officers can be fooled by phony notes

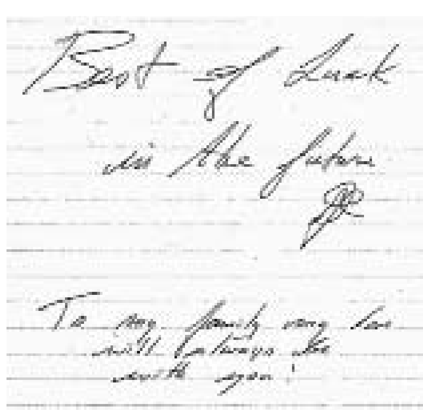
ON DEC. 9, 2001, the day Dr. John Connelly and his wife, Gloria, learned their son had died, they were immediately suspicious about what had happened. Police told the Ottawa couple the 22-year-old—a popular, athletic and high-achieving pharmacy student at the University of Toronto with everything to live for—had jumped to his death. Over the phone, an officer read out what he said was a suicide note: "Best of luck in the future," was scrawled in ink at the top of a piece of white paper. The initials of their son, named after his father, were scribbled underneath. After that, all it said was, "To my family my love will always be with you!"

Connelly couldn't believe it. "Best of luck?" he recalls saying to the officer. "That's just a greeting. That's a rough copy of something John's writing." His son often drafted messages on scraps of paper before transcribing them to cards for special occasions; the Connellys gathered examples for investigators. Another thing bothered the family about the note: its formality. "We all said that John would never write that," explains Connelly, a dental surgeon. "He would never address us that way. He had a few nicknames for me." The Connellys hired two document examiners to compare the note to messages indisputably authored by their son. Both of them questioned whether the word 'to' matched John's handwriting. "So the question is," says Connelly, "whose is the 'to'?"

More than eight years have passed since John's body was discovered in the parking lot of his Toronto apartment building, and his family is still being told that he killed himself. Just two weeks ago, the Connellys, who have repeatedly requested an inquest and that the manner of death be changed, received a report from Ontario chief coroner Dr. Andrew McCallum stating, among other things: "This note written by your son was a genuine suicide note." The phrase "Best of luck in the future," he insisted, "seems to me



Everything to live for: *His parents believe John Connelly—popular and bright—didn't kill himself but was the victim of foul play*



Best of Luck
in the future

To my family my love
will always be
with you!

to be valedictory in nature and in keeping with a farewell note."

John's parents, however, are still convinced that his death was at someone else's hand. "You'd have to do an investigation," says Connelly, "but with the record of evidence, certainly it would appear that way."

To some, this might seem a case of grieving parents unable to accept that their beloved son would take his own life. However, John's startlingly brief and impersonal note raises significant questions. In fact, there is mounting evidence that when it comes to verifying a suicide, investigators don't always get it right. Groundbreaking research by Canadian experts is illuminating the process by which individuals, and police officers in particular, determine whether a suicide note is real.

One study examining how decisions are made, conducted by a researcher at Memorial University in St. John's, revealed that police officers are only correct about the authenticity of suicide notes 50 per cent of the time—as good as flipping a coin. "You get 50 per cent through chance," says Brent Snook, the psychology professor who authored the study in which police officers were asked to judge 30 suicide notes, some of which were phony. "If they had just said, 'yes, no, yes, no,' you'd probably get the same results." The officers, it appears, fixated on two surprising variables to conclude a note was fake: the use of cognitive process verbs such as "I think, feel, fear, believe" and the absence of an explanation for the suicide.

Another study, however, revealed that genuine suicide notes have two other variables in common: expressions of "positive affect" such as gratitude, love and terms of endearment, and short sentence length. But positive affect contradicts the stereotype most people have of suicidal individuals as depressed and detached. While some certainly are, that doesn't necessarily inhibit them from feeling warmly about their loved ones. "If that's the view a police officer has, they're going to make the incorrect decision," says Craig Bennell, author of the study, and a psychology professor and director of the

police research lab at Carleton University in Ottawa. Short sentences are also a marker of authenticity because presumably suicidal people have "come to terms with what they're going to do," explains Bennell. "It's not beyond the imagination to expect them to be able to say what they want in a much more succinct way, and without the flowery language and detailed explanations."

Interestingly, in his latest report to the Connellys, coroner McCallum cites Bennell's research to corroborate his assertion that John's death was a suicide. Bennell, who says he was not involved with the decision or even aware of the case, is unsure the limited data published in his study—which used students, not cops—justify such a decision. Both he and Snook emphasize that their work is preliminary and full of shortcomings, including small numbers of study participants and suicide notes, some dating back more than 50 years, to review.

The researchers are confident, however, that even just a few reliable cues in a note can be effective indicators of suicide. "In the criminal justice system there is this expectation that everyone—judges, lawyers, police officers—ought never to make a decision until every bit of information has been examined and turned over, quantified and integrated," says Snook. "This is unrealistic. Our minds are not supercomputers." The quality of the information, it appears, is more important than the quantity.

If the Connellys' suspicions of foul play are correct, it won't be the first time investigators have been wrong about a suicide note, which studies show accompany about one in three or four suicides. In 2008, Newfoundlander Bruce Leyte was found alive in Ontario, having faked his own suicide two years earlier to escape money woes; a convincing note was left inside his abandoned truck. A British nurse discovered hanging in her garage in 2007 was actually killed by her jealous husband, a cop who typed the "suicide note" wearing rubber gloves.

John Connelly is gone, but for his parents there is no peace. This week, they will meet Bennell for the first time to discuss the note at the centre of this tragedy. Their fight to find out how their son died is what makes Snook and Bennell's research vital. "The worry, of course, is miscarriages of justice," points out Bennell. "In the worst-case scenario, guilty people will go free if we don't have the ability to identify if a note is genuine or fake. Some people will get away, and other people will get penalized in a way that they shouldn't." **CATHY GULLI**

GETTY IMAGES

The poodle wins: *But it's hard to tell if obedience causes longevity, or the other way round*

SCIENCE

Heel, Fido. It's for your own good.

Why docile, obedient dog breeds live longer than their more rambunctious counterparts

REBELS OFTEN LIVE hard and die young. Such is the case for extreme athletes, out-of-control celebrities—and, according to a recent study, certain breeds of dogs. As a team of researchers from the University of Sherbrooke concluded in a paper slated for publication in *The American Naturalist* in June, "obedient (or docile, shy) breeds live longer than disobedient (or bold) ones."

The finding, as the study asserts, reflects the product of more than two centuries of "extensive artificial selection." Beyond physical appearance and reproduction capabilities, humans placed an emphasis on behaviour traits, breeding for everything from fighting to guarding to companionship. In time, a spectrum of breeds emerged, each with a distinct temperament: hounds, for instance, are known for their hunting prowess; pugs, meanwhile, have become popular lap dogs.

But it appears there were unintended consequences, too. By comparing life expectancy data (surprisingly easy to obtain, thanks to extensive mortality statistics compiled by a Swedish pet insurance company) with the trainability of certain breeds, the researchers found a link between obedience and longevity. Lead author Vincent Careau, a Ph.D. student in biology, offered several examples to illustrate the point: poodles, for instance, are about 30 per cent more docile than boxers and four times as likely to live past 10; the English springer spaniel, meanwhile, is 34 per cent more docile than the basset hound and twice as likely to see its 10th birthday. (Because smaller breeds generally live longer, Careau compared dogs of similar size.)

Whether obedience causes longevity or longevity causes obedience, however, is more difficult to discern—making this what Careau calls "a chicken and egg argument." On the one hand, a dog who obeys its master is less likely to run into the street, for instance, and may be therefore more likely to live to a ripe old age. But, he says, it's also possible dogs that are genetically programmed to live longer are more likely to stay put when told.

The study also found a link between a dog's aggressiveness and its energy needs. While the correlation may seem rather intuitive (before he died last year, Careau's adviser Don Thomas observed that it's an adaptive necessity to have the "metabolic machinery to back up threats"), it runs counter to what's commonly printed on pet food packages, where size is often the single determining factor in terms of a dog's energy needs.

Though the findings could have implications for humans—do shy people live longer?—Careau is reluctant to make generalizations about the personality traits of certain gene pools or cultures. "It's really a minefield," he says. For now, he's focusing on four-legged animals, currently testing his hypotheses on chipmunks and mice, which are much less likely to take offence. **RACHEL MENDLESON**