

Role of Autopsy Surgeons in Determining Firearm Types in Fatal Shootings: Insights from the Sambhal Firing Case

Md. Imran Wahab

IPS, Inspector General of Police, West Bengal

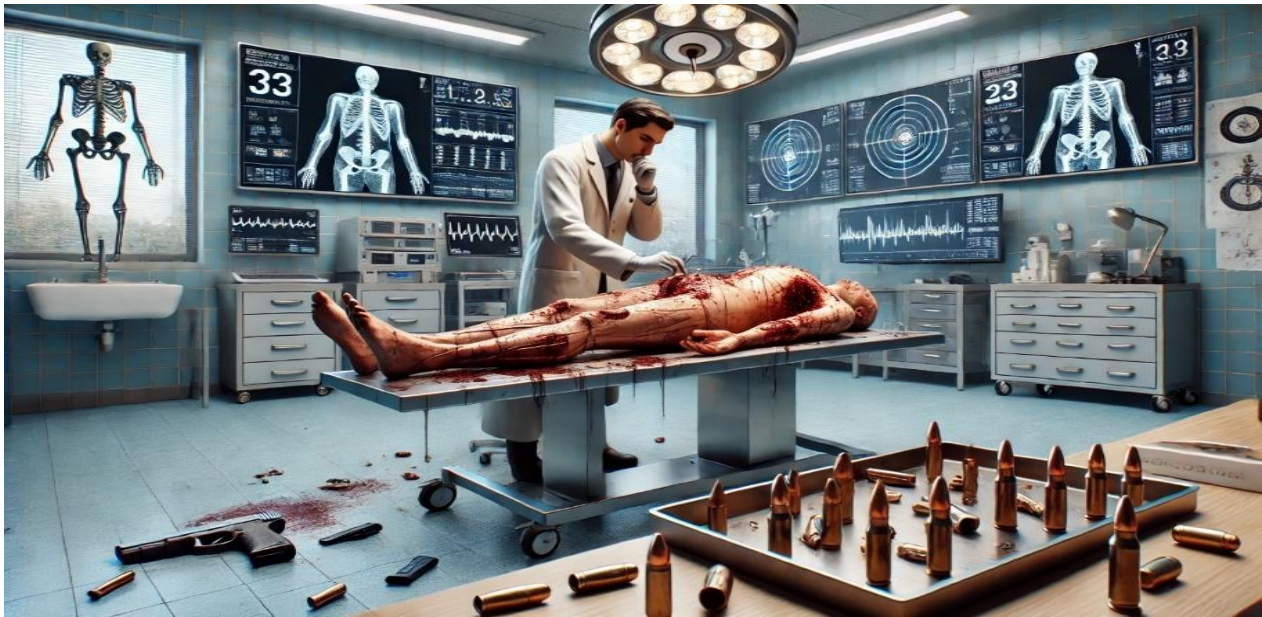
Abstract:

This paper investigates the essential role that forensic pathologist, commonly known as autopsy surgeon, plays in identifying the type of firearm involved in fatal shooting incidents. Although their main focus is on determining the cause and manner of death, these specialists can offer valuable information regarding the firearm's characteristics based on their detailed assessments of injuries, projectile analyses, and other findings from the autopsy. It is essential to acknowledge, however, that their capacity to definitively identify the specific make and model of a weapon is constrained. Consequently, further evaluation by specialized ballistics experts is frequently necessary to clarify these details. This study explores how forensic pathologists can develop informed opinions about the firearm used in a fatal incident, assesses the reliability of these opinions in the absence of a ballistics expert report, and underscores the inherent limitations of their conclusions. Ultimately, the partnership between forensic pathologists and ballistics experts is vital for achieving a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances surrounding shooting fatalities, as an autopsy surgeon alone cannot determine the nature of the firearm involved in a death related to gunfire without assistance from a ballistics expert.

Keywords: Forensic Pathologists, Autopsy Surgeons, Fatal Shooting, Firearm Identification, Gunshot Wounds, Projectile Analysis, Muzzle Imprint, Ballistics Experts, Wound Trajectory.

1. Introduction:

Forensic pathologists, commonly known as autopsy surgeons, play a crucial role in investigating fatal shootings. Their main duty involves determining the cause and manner of death through a thorough examination of the deceased's body. In firearm-related cases, these specialists may be requested to offer expert insights about the weapon involved; however, their conclusions will not be absolute and will depend on thorough assessments of the injuries and other relevant evidence noted during the autopsy. This paper explores the various methods that forensic pathologists utilize to identify the specific type of firearm involved in shooting incidents. It also addresses key factors that affect the reliability and accuracy of their conclusions, such as the quality of the evidence, the nature of the injuries, and the limitations of forensic science. Additionally, the paper highlights the important role of ballistics experts who work alongside forensic pathologists to further validate and support these forensic findings. By synthesizing insights from both disciplines, a more comprehensive understanding of the circumstances surrounding firearm-related deaths can be achieved, thereby enhancing the overall investigative process.



2. Wound Characteristics:

Forensic pathologists often determine the type of firearm involved by examining gunshot wound characteristics. They can classify these findings into various categories, which helps in understanding the specifics of the shooting incident and aids in the overall investigation of the case.

Gunshot Entry Wounds:

The size and shape of an entry wound can reveal information about the type of firearm used. Different types of guns, such as handguns, rifles, or shotguns, produce distinct wound characteristics. For example, a handgun, generally of a smaller caliber, creates a smaller, rounded entry wound, whereas a rifle or shotgun may result in larger, more irregular injuries. Additionally, the distance from which the gun was fired can be inferred from the presence of gunpowder stippling - tiny particles of gunpowder embedded in the skin surrounding the entry wound. This stippling tends to be more prominent in close-range shots, which offers further insights into the type of weapon utilized.

Muzzle Imprint:

When a firearm's muzzle is in direct contact with a victim's skin at the moment of discharge, it can leave a visible imprint around the injury. This unique marking can yield valuable insights into the firearm used, as various weapons have different muzzle diameters, which affect the characteristics of the wound. For instance, a handgun may leave a smaller imprint compared to a shotgun, which might create a larger, more pronounced mark. Analyzing these imprints helps forensic experts determine not only the type of firearm but also circumstances surrounding the shooting incident.

Wound Trajectory:

The bullet's path through the body can yield essential information about the firearm's caliber and type. The trajectory is affected by various factors, such as the bullet's velocity and size, which can fluctuate depending on the firearm. In some instances, the trajectory might also indicate whether the weapon was discharged from a long distance or from a close range.

Projectile and Bullet Analysis:

In some situations, bullets or fragments discovered during an autopsy or at a crime scene can provide valuable insights. Forensic pathologists often analyze aspects of the bullets, such as their caliber and rifling patterns. For instance, a .45 caliber bullet with unique grooves may hint at its origin. However,

such analysis isn't enough to conclusively identify the exact firearm used. To link these projectiles to a specific weapon, further ballistic testing is required. This task is usually entrusted to specialized ballistic experts who can utilize advanced techniques and databases to make definitive connections, similar to matching a fingerprint.

Distance of Firing:

A crucial element of forensic pathology involves determining the distance from which a gunshot was discharged. By analyzing factors like gunshot residue, gunpowder stippling, and the characteristic features of the wound, forensic pathologists can discern whether the shot was fired from close, intermediate, or long range. For instance, if a wound shows a significant amount of stippling and residue, it may indicate that the shot was fired from a distance of just a few feet, suggesting the shooter was in close proximity. Conversely, a wound without much stippling but with clear burning or soot may suggest it was fired from a greater distance. Such assessments not only provide insight into the circumstances of the shooting but also help ascertain the caliber and power of the firearm used. This information is vital for building a clearer picture of the event and aids law enforcement in identifying the type of weapon involved.

3. Limitations of Forensic Pathologist Experts:

Despite the valuable insights forensic pathologists can offer about the general type of weapon, there are inherent limitations regarding their ability to definitively identify the specific firearm involved:

Ballistics Testing:

Typically, forensic pathologists lack training in ballistic analyses. Identifying the exact firearm necessitates an in-depth understanding of ballistics, including projectile behavior and gunshot residue analysis, along with comparative studies with known weapons. The role of ballistics experts and firearms examiners is crucial for definitively associating a bullet with a specific firearm.

Weapon Identification:

While pathologists can make inferences about a weapon's nature based on injury patterns, pinpointing a specific firearm (for example, a "country-made pistol") usually falls outside their professional domain. The term "country-made" often refers to homemade or unlicensed firearms, which do not have a standardized design or set features. Without additional evidence, like the recovered firearm or ammunition, the pathologist's assessment is largely based on inference rather than scientific certainty.

Investigative Context:

The trustworthiness of a forensic pathologist's opinion can also hinge on the broader context of the investigation. For instance, if law enforcement officials deny the use of their firearms in a particular incident, and the pathologist concludes a different weapon was utilized, further investigation becomes necessary. This may involve analyzing collected bullets, cartridge cases, or performing ballistics tests on police firearms to verify whether or not they were discharged.

Additionally, the presence of other forensic evidence - such as gunshot residue found on the body, witness testimonies, and surveillance footage - can either support or refute the pathologist's conclusions. Investigations at the scene can yield critical information that corroborates or contradicts the pathologist's evaluation of the weapon used.

4. Literature Review:

Forensic pathology is a specialized discipline focused on investigating deaths resulting from violent inci-

dents, including those involving firearms. The primary function of a forensic pathologist is to ascertain the cause and manner of death; however, their expertise also encompasses offering insights regarding the characteristics of the weapon utilized. Research conducted by Doyen and Hayne (2005) emphasizes the vital contribution that pathologists make in examining injuries inflicted by firearms, specifically gunshot wounds (GSWs), which aids in pinpointing the type of weapon.

Forensic pathologists meticulously analyze gunshot wounds (GSWs) to extract information related to the firearm used. Knight (2013) points out that the examination of wound attributes - such as the dimensions of entry wounds, shapes of exit wounds, and associated injuries - can provide implications regarding the firearm type. Although the primary objective is to evaluate the impact of the injury, the findings can significantly enhance the understanding of the firearm involved, often leading to collaboration with forensic ballistics specialists for definitive conclusions.

Research by Sauer and Lawrence (2017) elaborates on how the dimensions and configurations of gunshot entry wounds can help distinguish between different firearms, such as handguns versus rifles. Typically, smaller, round entry wounds correlate with small-caliber handguns, whereas larger, irregular wounds may indicate the use of larger firearms like shotguns or rifles. Additionally, the presence of gunpowder stippling signifies close-range discharge, aiding forensic pathologists in estimating the firearm's proximity during the shooting, thereby facilitating weapon identification.

When a firearm is pressed against a victim's body, it leaves a muzzle imprint that can provide further evidence regarding the type of firearm. Research by Wilkins and Spafford (2011) shows that pathologists can analyze the size and shape characteristics of these imprints to infer the weapon type. This physical evidence becomes particularly critical in incidents of close-range shootings.

Another significant aspect is the assessment of bullet trajectory, which can reveal details about the firearm's features. As noted by Rosenberg and Davidson (2007), the pathway of the bullet through the body can provide insights into whether a high-velocity weapon, such as a rifle, or a low-velocity weapon, like a handgun, was employed. Understanding the bullet's trajectory is crucial for determining variables like the angle of fire and distance, both of which are essential for accurate firearm identification.

Analyzing projectiles recovered during autopsies can yield valuable information about the firearm used. Fraser and Cox (2015) assert that the caliber and rifling marks on bullets can assist forensic pathologists, although they caution that such findings alone are insufficient for definitive firearm identification. Comprehensive examinations by ballistics experts are necessary to compare rifling patterns with known firearms.

Despite their critical role, forensic pathologists face limitations in definitively identifying firearms. Horsley (2010) discusses the reliance of pathologists on observable wound patterns, noting that they cannot identify the exact model of a firearm used. They typically collaborate with forensic ballistics specialists, who possess the specialized training required to match bullets and casings to specific firearms.

The expertise of ballistics specialists is crucial for confirming the specific type of firearm involved in fatal shootings. Baker and Smith (2018) clarify that while forensic pathologists can provide insights derived from injury patterns and recovered projectiles, it is the ballistics expert who conducts detailed analyses of bullet striations, rifling, and ballistic trajectories to establish a link between a projectile and its corresponding firearm.

5. Joint Investigations by Pathologists and Ballistics Experts:

The alliance between pathologists and ballistics experts plays a crucial role in investigating deaths caused by firearms, merging medical acumen with forensic knowledge to piece together the circumstances surrounding a victim's demise. Pathologists contribute essential information through autopsies, where they assess entry and exit wounds, establish the bullet's trajectory, and check for gunshot residues or stippling, which assist in determining the firing distance. These critical details inform ballistics experts as they delve deeper into the analysis of the weapon and ammunition involved.

Building upon the findings provided by pathologists, ballistics experts examine bullets or fragments obtained during autopsies to identify their caliber, type, and unique features of the firearm. By utilizing comparison microscopes, they can link recovered projectiles to specific weapons and analyze trajectories to reconstruct the shooter's location and firing angle. Their specialized expertise ensures a thorough understanding of the firearm's involvement in the crime.

This teamwork enhances investigations: ballistics experts utilize the medical insights from pathologists to contextualize their findings, while pathologists rely on the input from ballistics specialists to refine their assessments of the cause and manner of death. Such a collaborative approach guarantees an exhaustive analysis of evidence, supporting law enforcement and the judicial system in addressing crimes involving firearms.

6. Case Study - Critical Evaluation of the Autopsy Surgeon's Findings Regarding Use of Firearms in the Sambhal Deaths:

The autopsy findings in the Sambhal violence incident on November 24, 2024, indicate that the deaths of four individuals were caused by 315-bore bullets fired from homemade firearms, rather than from police gunfire. These results play a significant role in shaping the narrative of the incident. However, a comprehensive assessment of these findings underscores the need to integrate the medical evidence with additional forensic, ballistic, and contextual information to ensure accountability and clarity. Given that the autopsy surgeon lacks specialized knowledge in ballistics and has limited familiarity with the various types and classifications of firearms and ammunition - areas typically reserved for ballistic experts - it would be unwise to draw any firm conclusions about the weapons responsible for the fatal shots.

Advantages of the Autopsy Results:

The autopsy surgeon's identification of 315-bore bullets is noteworthy, as this caliber is often linked to homemade firearms, setting it apart from the typical 9/.303/.38 mm and other projectiles used by police. This discovery offers a solid medical foundation to challenge initial claims of police involvement in the deaths. Nonetheless, the conclusions drawn by the autopsy surgeons may not represent the ultimate assessment of the case. While they provide critical insights into the deceased's injuries and cause of death, the determination of the type of firearms and ammunition responsible for the fatal shots is undertaken by ballistic experts, not by the autopsy surgeons themselves. These forensic specialists analyze the characteristics and ballistic properties of the firearms involved, as well as the ballistic trajectory of the bullets. Therefore, their findings are essential in constructing a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances surrounding the incident, complementing the autopsy results and contributing to the overall investigation.

Limitations and Possible Shortcomings:

While the autopsy accurately determined the caliber of the bullets, it falls short of providing conclusive proof regarding both the identity of the shooter and the details of the shooting incident itself. The

assertion that makeshift weapons supposedly used by protesters were responsible for the fatalities relies heavily on circumstantial evidence, including photographs, video footage, eyewitness testimonies, and police statements. Without additional corroborative evidence, such as ballistic trajectory analyses, gunshot residue tests on potential suspects, or a direct match between the recovered firearms and the bullets, the conclusions reached by the autopsy surgeons may lack the rigor necessary for a comprehensive judicial examination.

Furthermore, the potential for evidence tampering or manipulation should not be overlooked, especially given the controversial nature of the event and its socio-political ramifications. The autopsy surgeon's responsibilities are confined to determining the medical causes of death and roughly identifying the weapon type, leaving significant investigative gaps that law enforcement must address.

Importance of a Thorough Investigation:

An autopsy surgeon can ascertain though not conclusively the caliber of a bullet by examining wound characteristics, bullet fragments, or intact projectiles found within the body. Nonetheless, definitively identifying .315-bore bullets based solely on the injuries is difficult, as different calibers can create similar wound patterns. The surgeon's observations require validation through ballistic analysis to accurately identify the type of firearm involved.

Although the autopsy may provide vital information, it cannot definitively determine the firearm used without additional forensic evidence. To support such a claim, bullet striations, trajectories, and links to a specific weapon must be established, emphasizing the importance of collaborative efforts across various disciplines.

To confirm the autopsy results, a comprehensive investigation that incorporates ballistics experts, forensic scientists, and crime scene analysts is essential. Conducting ballistic analyses on the seized 315-bore firearms and trajectory studies can help create a clearer connection between the bullets and the purported shooters. Additionally, forensic assessments of injuries, including the detection of gunpowder stippling, can provide insights into the firing range and lend support to claims regarding the type of firearm involved.

Autopsy surgeons, while highly skilled in their field, do not possess the specialized knowledge required to make definitive assessments about firearms in cases of gun-related fatalities. Understanding the intricacies of ballistic evidence demands expertise that falls outside the typical training of medical examiners. Therefore, they are not in a position to offer conclusive opinions regarding the type of gun involved in a shooting incident unless they collaborate closely with ballistic experts. These specialists analyze various aspects of ammunition and firearm mechanics, which is essential for providing a comprehensive and accurate determination of the weapon's characteristics and its role in the death.

In conclusion, although the autopsy surgeon's findings provide a foundation for claiming that the fatalities were linked to homemade firearms, the investigation must extend beyond these medical insights. To ensure accountability and prevent any distortion of the narrative, a comprehensive and unbiased forensic examination is essential. This inquiry should combine the autopsy findings with ballistic analysis, contextual evidence, and significant elements such as CCTV footage, eyewitness testimonies, and video recordings. Such an integrated approach is crucial for uncovering the truth and delivering justice in this matter.

7. The Limited Role of Forensic Pathologists in Identifying Firearm Types in Fatal Shootings:

Forensic pathologists are essential in the examination of fatal gunshot wounds, but their capacity to definitively identify the type of firearm involved is inherently restricted. Research indicates that while pathologists can assess wound characteristics - such as the dimensions of entry and exit wounds, the presence of stippling, and the trajectory of the bullet - these characteristics often overlap among different firearm classifications. For example, DiMaio (1999) points out that while the size and shape of injuries may offer hints regarding bullet caliber, they do not serve as conclusive evidence of the specific firearm used. Moreover, factors from the environment, including the range of fire, angle of impact, and changes to projectiles, further complicate interpretations, highlighting the necessity for ballistic specialists to conduct additional analyses.

Enhancements in forensic ballistics and crime scene reconstruction have clarified the distinction between the roles of pathology and ballistics. Pathologists are confined to macroscopic examinations and observations made on the body, while ballistics experts investigate microscopic striations, cartridge casings, and firearms' unique markings. Forensic literature consistently illustrates that pathologists depend significantly on collaboration with ballistic experts and laboratory analyses to form conclusions related to firearms. Investigations have shown that matching gunshot residue (GSR) or bullet fragments found during autopsies to specific firearms necessitates specialized ballistic methodologies that lie outside the realm of pathologists' expertise.

Nevertheless, the role of forensic pathologists is vital in providing contextual information about gunshot wounds that aids ballistic investigations. Research has underscored the significance of autopsy results in determining essential factors such as the range of fire, trajectory, and the number of shots discharged. Although these details do not allow for the identification of the specific firearm, they play a crucial role in the overall investigative process. The clear delineation of responsibilities between forensic pathology and ballistics fosters a thorough understanding of firearm-related deaths and upholds the scientific integrity of each field.

8. Vulnerabilities of Postmortem Reports:

Postmortem reports can be compromised by various pressures that influence forensic pathologists to alter death conclusions. In high-stakes environments, police, political figures, and influential families may exert undue influence, prompting pathologists to change causes of death. For example, reclassifying a homicide as an accidental death may shield a suspect from accountability, thus undermining the integrity of the autopsy and obstructing justice for the deceased.

Additionally, negligence during autopsies often results in the oversight of critical evidence pointing to foul play. Failure to identify signs of strangulation, such as ligature marks or bruising, can erroneously lead to natural cause conclusions. Such oversights may result in wrongful interpretations that hinder legal investigations and deny justice for victims and their families.

Manipulation of toxicology findings is another serious concern. Pathologists might alter reports to mask substance abuse or possible poisoning, particularly if an influential individual is involved. Intentional negative findings not only breach ethical standards but can also violate legal codes, undermining both public health data and the integrity of judicial processes.

Misrepresentation of autopsy documentation can likewise compromise ethical standards. In police custody cases, key injuries may be minimized or omitted in photographs to protect law enforcement. This selective representation obscures the true nature of injuries and erodes transparency in forensic eva-

luations.

External assessments are often insufficient, especially in cases involving blunt force trauma. Rushed examinations may miss critical indicators like hidden fractures. Failing to conduct thorough evaluations can lead to incorrect conclusions about the cause of death and obscure evidence of potential abuse or misconduct.

Finally, personal, social, political, caste, and religious biases and conflicts of interest can severely distort postmortem evaluations. When pathologists have connections to law enforcement and under extreme administrative and political pressure, their findings may align with law enforcement narratives rather than objective evidence, reducing the credibility of forensic assessments. Robust oversight, adherence to established protocols, and comprehensive ethical training for forensic pathologists are essential to ensure fair and accurate determinations of death.

9. Conclusion:

Forensic pathologists play a vital role in identifying the firearm used in fatal shootings, but their capabilities have limitations as they are not trained in forensic ballistics. They provide crucial insights about injuries, the shooting distance, and potential caliber, yet they cannot definitively identify the specific make and model of the weapon. Their findings should be interpreted alongside broader investigative efforts that encompass ballistic analyses and other forensic evidence. Even in cases where the firearm remains unidentified, ballistics experts are essential for corroborating or challenging the pathologist's assessments. Ultimately, a synergistic approach that combines the expertise of forensic pathologists, ballistics specialists, and crime scene investigators is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the firearm involved in a shooting incident. This collaboration enhances the investigative process and supports more accurate conclusions regarding firearm-related fatalities.

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