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## Strangulation Cases; Seminar Explores Details Overlooked in Investigations

By Alayna DeMartini, *Columbus Dispatch*

The man called 911 with an odd complaint.

“She won’t die,” he told the dispatcher. “I’ve tried to kill her four different ways. She won’t die.”

But when medics arrived at the couple’s home they found that the man had succeeded in strangling his wife.

The call to a 911 operator in Las Vegas was played yesterday for central Ohio police officers, prosecutors and emergency personnel during a training session on recognizing and prosecuting strangulation and attempted strangulation cases.

Too often the assailant walks away with little or no punishment because there aren’t always marks left on the victim, said Gael B. Strack, a San Diego city attorney who led yesterday’s seminar at the Franklin County Courthouse.

The victim may have serious injuries that aren’t always apparent, such as internal fractures in the throat, Strack said.

“We understand when someone’s stabbed, when their lip is cut, because we can see the signs,” Strack said. “With strangulation, most victims will have internal injuries. It’s easy to overlook, minimize or trivialize.”

A study by the San Diego city attorney’s office of police reports showed that if there was no visible sign of attempted strangulation, the assailant wasn’t charged with a serious crime.

“We didn’t understand what we had in front of us,” Strack said.

The study, conducted in the late 1990s, showed that police often neglected to clearly document what symptoms victims were experiencing, Strack said. Cases that were prosecuted were charged as misdemeanors when many could have been felonies, Strack said.

Franklin County prosecutors estimate that 30 percent to 40 percent of the annual 6,000 domestic-violence cases in the county involve choking or strangulation, said Leslie Ashworth, director of the Columbus city attorney's domestic-violence unit.

Typically, victims of attempted strangulation will have red marks on the neck and a raspy voice, Ashworth said.

However, victims sometimes refuse to be treated at a hospital because they can't afford it, Ashworth said.

"Then you lose the evidence," Ashworth said.

Even when victims go to hospitals, they often minimize their injuries and do not blame them on others.

"The important thing is for everyone to realize that it's a potentially life-threatening matter and not say 'Oh, they were just choked,'" Ashworth said.

In Ohio, someone who tries to strangle a mate could be charged with domestic violence, which is a misdemeanor, or a felony such as felonious assault.

Some states have recently stepped up their domestic-violence laws and the penalties for strangulation attempts.

On Thursday, North Carolina Gov. Mike Easley signed legislation, "assault inflicting serious physical injury by (attempted) strangulation," a felony punishable by up to two years in prison.

An Oklahoma law that goes into effect in November makes it a felony to commit attempted strangulation on a domestic partner.

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