



THIS WEEK IN TRAINING

“CHEMICAL SUICIDES”

Chemical suicides have become a growing phenomenon not only in the United States but just recently, here in Suffolk County. Within the last 3 weeks the Kings Park Fire Department and now the Huntington Manor Fire Department responded to incidents involving chemical suicides, and there have been 7 incidents in the county as of late.

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What It Is

A chemical suicide is a technique that mixes household chemicals to produce a deadly hydrogen sulfide gas.

How It's Done

In this day of the information age there are now multiple websites giving instructions or a “How-To” so to speak, on this technique. One way that seems to be most common in the U.S. is to mix insecticide with toilet bowl cleaner to create a poisonous gas, possibly Phosgene. Phosgene gas was used as a chemical weapon in World War I with horribly deadly results. The victim will usually sit in a car with the windows rolled up and unleash the poison into the interior of the car, passing out and ultimately dying. There have been some cases where the suicide took place inside an apartment building. A 14 year old girl released Hydrogen Sulfide (H₂S) into her apartment killing herself and forcing the evacuation of 90 residents and causing them all to become violently ill.

A few months ago, in the parking lot of a busy shopping center in Patchogue, a man sprayed the entire inside of his rental car with insecticide, got in and lit a cigarette causing the vehicle to explode. At the time it was considered an accident but the fact that he was in a rental, and was that stupid, and in light of this new phenomenon, I would venture to think someone is taking another look at that particular case. If they're not, they should...

Precautions

One uncommon occurrence with the vehicle version is that they sometimes will leave a note on the window of the car stating deadly chemicals inside, do not open door. (Figure1). That being

HEY, YOU NEVER KNOW

We just don't get the fires these days like we used to. That's why it's so important to train as much as possible. Sometimes reading a ten minute article could save the life of a brother/sister firefighter...or even your own...

“Let no man's ghost say his training let him down”

said, neither the victim in Kings Park or the victim in Huntington Manor left a note on the window. This could definitely be more of a problem for EMS and police than for the fire departments but once EMS or PD figures out what's going on, you can be sure we're going to get called. To that though, how many times have we been called to an MVA that wasn't actually an MVA? Instead there was an unconscious victim inside the car having some sort of *other* medical emergency? How many times have we responded to an MVA and been there first? Something to think about at a single car MVA with an unconscious victim, check the car for damage before you open the door.



FIGURE 1 SHOWS AN INCIDENT IN PASEDNA CALIFORNIA WHERE THE VICTIM LEFT A NOTE ON THE WINDOW

Another possibility is a civilian or good samaritan opens the door before anyone arrives, takes a hit and goes down. You could wind up on a scene with multiple victims, including police and EMS personnel.

Tactics

Seeing as how most times if you come across something like this you're likely not going to know what chemical it is that they used, it might be a smart idea to let a Haz-Mat team handle the situation. Especially if you're pretty sure the victim is beyond the point of being a savable life. If there are obvious signs of death beyond savability, such as skin discoloration, obvious swelling etc. it's now a crime scene and a recovery anyway.

If you do feel that there is a savable life inside the car, say if a witness says the victim was just standing outside the car a few minutes ago, then it is up to the Incident Commander to make the decision as to whether or not it would be a go or no-go. If it is a go, even if it's an outdoor scene, obviously, at a minimum full turnout gear along with an SCBA are a must.

There is no concrete set of tactics for these types of incidents as every situation is different and, it is really up to the Incident Commander to make the tactical decisions at each incident. Common sense along with Haz-Mat Awareness would seem to be the smartest and safest routes to take however.

Conclusion

There have been over 800 suicides in Japan alone and a growing number of incidents in the U.S. from California to Kings Park using this technique. With the ongoing mental health crisis in this country coupled with the fact, and it's no secret, there is a drug problem in our area, there is a very real possibility we are going to come across an incident like this in the near future.

With multiple "How to Kill Yourself" websites on the internet with an untold number of subscribers, this is going to occur more and more. One article I read stated there are more sites like this than there are cooking sites on the internet.

It is not so much a matter of if, but more like when the alarm comes in, make sure you use common sense and the Haz-Mat Awareness training you have been given when making a decision on how to proceed.

Thanks for reading,

Have a safe week...

Fire Marshal

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