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# Skin suicide note written in mehndi (henna)

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## Abstract

Suicide messages on the skin are rare. Until now, in all reported cases, the writing tool used by the victims has been a pen. We report a suicide case by hanging in which the victim had written a note on her palm in mehndi, or henna, at a wedding ceremony three days before the fatal act. The note was discovered at autopsy.

## Keywords

Skin message, mehndi, writing tool

## Introduction

Suicide notes are a key piece of forensic evidence in the investigation of whether the death is really due to suicide or other causes.<sup>1</sup> It also provides a valuable insight into the thinking and motive of suicide victims. The prevalence of suicide notes has been reported to be 5% to 43%.<sup>2</sup>

Suicide notes are conventionally written on notebooks, papers, mirrors, etc., which are mostly found at the scene and are usually collected by investigating agencies. Recently, e-suicide notes have been found.<sup>3</sup> A few cases of suicide notes written on the skin are also reported.<sup>2,4–6</sup>

Most suicide notes are written with a pen or marker.<sup>2</sup> Less common implements are lipsticks, blood, and chalk. Messages on the skin are usually by a pen or marker pen.<sup>2,4–6</sup> Here, we report an unusual case, in which victim had written a note with the help of mehndi on her palm which was discovered at autopsy.

## Case report

A 28-year-old woman was found hanging at her residence. On examination during autopsy, besides the signs of asphyxia, there was a note written in English language in mehndi which read “I hate my life” inside the symbol of a heart (Figure 1). The mehndi was reddish brown in colour. The same colour mehndi design was also present on the dorsum of the left hand. Autopsy findings concluded the cause of death was asphyxia as a result of hanging.

Her parents revealed that she married at the age of 18 years and a few days later her husband was imprisoned for murder. Since then, she had stayed with her parents. Three days before her death she went to a wedding ceremony with other family members, where she applied mehndi on her left palm and dorsum of the left hand. She had used a mehndi packet, which is widely marketed in India (Figure 3). She was a right handed person and could read and write in the English language.

## Discussion

The skin message was written by the victim in her own handwriting. The note revealed her depression, unhappiness, and hopelessness towards her life. In their study of suicide notes in India, Giridhar et al.<sup>7</sup> found that the reasons for leaving suicide notes included forgiveness (56%), low mood and hopelessness (36%), anger (26%), blame (20%), and grievance (10%).

This victim used mehndi to write her message. mehndi is a temporary form of skin decoration commonly used by women of the Indian subcontinent

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during festive occasions. Mehndi paste is prepared from the leaves of a plant called *Lawsonia inermis* (henna leaves). It contains a strong pigment known as lawsone (2-hydroxy-1, 4-naphthoquinone) which gets absorbed in the outer porous layer of skin and hair and binds to the keratin in it, creating a fast stain. Mehndi is usually applied on the lighter skin surface such as the palm or sole. After 15 to 20 min of application, the paste will dry up, and on removing the mehndi, the design appears in a pale to dark orange colour. It gradually darkens through oxidation over a period of 1 to 3 days. The final reddish brown colour will last for 1 to 3 weeks depending on the quality of henna paste used as well as

site of application, as thicker skin like in the palm stains darker and longer than thinner skin. The mehndi stain lasts until the outer layer of skin or hair is exfoliated.<sup>8</sup> In our case, the colour of the mehndi writing at autopsy was reddish brown, suggesting that the mehndi was applied more than three days previously, which matched the history of the case, i.e. application of mehndi three days prior to the suicide. The forensic investigation usually examines the time interval between the time of the note (if it was dated) and the actual date of the event.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the colour of the mehndi may help to estimate the time interval between the time of writing the note and the death.

She chose her palm for writing the note because it was a readily accessible, lighter area, and mehndi can be easily distinguishable over it. She might have believed that it would in all probability be seen and read by her family members and investigating agencies. Except for the victim, no one in her family could read and write the English language. If any family members or other person could have read the message before the act, there might have been an intervention and the suicide could have been prevented. She had written the message over her left palm along with skin decoration over the dorsal aspect of her hand in mehndi. Hence, no family suspected any problem with her.

A message written in mehndi is prone to erasure, but not as easily as one written with a pen. On a body, a note in mehndi may be written by someone else; however, the handwriting of the victim can be verified. Examination and authentication of handwriting in messages on body surfaces and by unusual writing tools like mehndi may pose difficulty.



**Figure 1.** Message written on the palm in mehndi.



**Figure 2.** Ligature mark on neck and mehndi on the dorsum of left hand.



**Figure 3.** Mehndi marketed in a cone shaped packet.

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