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May 13, 2009

Findings on pregnant suicide open Eddie Gilfoyle case to doubt



Eddie Gilfoyle has always denied killing his wife Paula

[Dominic Kennedy](#), Investigations Editor

Crucial new evidence has emerged that casts doubt on the conviction of a man serving a life sentence for the murder of his pregnant wife.

Eddie Gilfoyle has spent 17 years behind bars protesting his innocence of tricking his wife Paula into writing a suicide note then hanging her in the garage of their home.

At the time of his trial in 1993 experts, police, lawyers and judges all believed that pregnant women hardly ever took their own lives and certainly not just before the baby was due. This view was confirmed by the available research.

It now appears that the consensus was wrong. Official statistics, newly uncovered by *The Times*, reveal that not only was suicide the main cause of maternal deaths in Britain but that hanging was also the method most frequently chosen.

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Also unknown to the murder trial jury, an 8½ months' pregnant Ulster woman hanged herself in almost identical circumstances shortly before Paula Gilfoyle's death, and her husband was judged by police to be innocent.

The Times can also disclose that:

- the newly found statistics show that the suicide rate is the same among women in late pregnancy as in the postnatal period, contrary to previous expert belief;
- the same in-depth research contradicts the formal advice given to detectives and prosecutors in the Gilfoyle case, which is made public today for the first time;
- the detective who led the Gilfoyle murder investigation believes that the outcome of the trial could have been different had the jury known these facts;
- a distinguished pathologist whose evidence was kept from the jury would have told them that in 40 years he had never come across a case of an adult being murdered by hanging.

The latest findings come as lawyers work on a fresh appeal for Gilfoyle, who is struggling even to get parole because he refuses to admit that he murdered his wife. She was found dead at their semi-detached house in the Wirral village of Upton.

Chris Huhne, the Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesman, said: "These new facts were not readily available either to the police or the court at the time of Eddie Gilfoyle's trial or his last appeal. They are another important building block in the case for a review of his conviction."

The important findings were published only in 2002, two years after Gilfoyle lost his second and last appeal against conviction. They are contained in the government-funded *Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths*, the most comprehensive study into the issue that for the first time used enhanced statistical techniques to find the true rate of maternal suicide.

"Obviously it would have been of interest to a jury or the Court of Appeal if that detail was available to them because it does take an element of 'ooh, we didn't know that' and it gives a bigger possibility to introduce an element of doubt," said Raymond Fitzsimmons, the former detective inspector who led the inquiry. "The jury have to be satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt, so, clearly it would have been of use to Gilfoyle."

During the murder inquiry Merseyside Police asked Sheila Rossan, a psychologist with a particular interest in women in pregnancy and the first year after delivery, to look at the incidence of antenatal suicide. She based her findings on what was then the latest *Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths*, covering the mid-1980s.

It was realised later by the researchers that the methodology that they had been using had led them to underestimate the incidence of suicide.

Dr Rossan's report, which has been seen by *The Times*, looked at suicides both before and after delivery. In the three years between 1985 and 1987 she discovered that there had been only five reported cases, of which just one was in pregnancy. Later, when the enquiry researchers took into account additional data provided by the Office for National Statistics, the rate rose to 26 maternal suicides per three years, with five or six of those happening during pregnancy.

Whereas Dr Rossan found no known maternal suicide by hanging, the later research showed that 35 per cent of maternal suicides involved hanging.

In the report she prepared for the police and Crown Prosecution Service, Dr Rossan calculated that, on the basis of the available statistics, the incidence of suicide in pregnancy was less than one in 2,009,563. When *The Times* showed Dr Rossan the later research, she stuck by her conclusions. "It appears that there are still only a total of five cases of suicide in the time period studied," she said. "In addition, the report suggests that the majority of suicides are associated with psychiatric disorders, particularly psychosis. I found no evidence that Paula Gilfoyle was suffering from such a state."

The safety of Gilfoyle's conviction was dealt a blow this year when *The Times* found long-lost police notes that could have given him an alibi for his wife's death. The doctor who examined her body estimated that she had died in the garage of her home at a time when Gilfoyle was still at work as a hospital nursing auxiliary, the notes stated. This timing was undisclosed by police to either prosecution or defence before trial.

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Expert in Eddie Gilfoyle case had never seen murder by hanging

Dominic Kennedy, Investigations Editor

The discovery that women are as likely to kill themselves in late pregnancy as early motherhood challenges key assumptions in the Gilfoyle trial.

Every professional in Liverpool Crown Court believed that the chances of a woman taking her life a couple of weeks before childbirth were almost non-existent.

A trial source told *The Times*: "There was a lot of statistical evidence that pregnant women never commit suicide. Human nature — they don't. They might do it afterwards, postnatal depression."

The defence had a potential witness, the pathologist Bernard Knight, who in 40 years had never encountered an adult murdered by hanging.

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His report said that Mrs Gilfoyle's hanging "shows no pathological evidence of anything other than self-suspension". Professor Knight was never called to the box.

The defence barrister, David Turner, QC, knew that the prosecution would quote statistics showing how rare it was for women to kill themselves in late pregnancy.

New research has found that women are as likely to kill themselves in the final six weeks of pregnancy as in the first six weeks after delivery.

Maternal suicides tended to be, like Mrs Gilfoyle, over 30, white, in stable relationships, from comfortable backgrounds and with a partner who worked.

The *Confidential Enquiries into Maternal Deaths* for 1997-2002 discovered suicide was the leading cause. "In some cases there appears to have been no evidence of any mental illness prior to the death by suicide or no clear understanding of the final trigger for the act of suicide."

Mrs Gilfoyle was described to the jury as happy, bubbly, looking forward to the birth of her baby and making plans for the future.