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Reporter's suicide confirmed by coroner

A flood of inquiries about Gary Webb's shooting death prompts statement.

By Sam Stanton -- Bee Staff Writer

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Facing a barrage of calls from the media and the public, the Sacramento County Coroner's Office issued a statement Tuesday confirming that former investigative reporter Gary Webb committed suicide with two gunshots to the head.

"The cause of death was determined to be self-inflicted gunshot wounds to the head," the coroner's statement said.

"Information and evidence gathered at the scene of death, including a handwritten note indicating an intention on the part of the decedent to take his own life, resulted in 'suicide' as the determined manner of death.

"The investigation is continuing and will take an estimated additional six to eight weeks to complete."

The statement was issued because of the number of calls that had flooded the Coroner's Office since The Bee reported Sunday that Webb's death was caused by more than one wound.

Webb, a former San Jose Mercury News reporter, was found dead in his Carmichael home Friday morning.

Webb, who most recently had been writing for the Sacramento News & Review, is survived by his ex-wife and three children.

Such a case normally would have sparked little notice. But Webb gained notoriety

in the 1990s after writing a series of stories for the Mercury News linking the CIA to Nicaraguan Contras seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government and to drug sales of crack cocaine flooding South Central Los Angeles in the 1980s.

His newspaper and others later questioned the conclusions in Webb's reporting, and he left the San Jose newspaper in 1997 after being moved to a suburban bureau.

But Webb's allegations spawned a following, including conspiracy theorists who have worked the Internet feverishly for days with notions that because Webb died from two gunshots he was killed by government agents or the Contras in retribution for the stories written nearly a decade ago.

Webb's ex-wife, Sue Bell, discounted such theories Tuesday, saying the 49-year-old Webb had been distraught for some time over his inability to get a job at another major newspaper.

"The way he was acting it would be hard for me to believe it was anything but suicide," Bell said.

She said that before he died Webb wrote and mailed notes to family members and placed his baby shoes in his mother's shed.

Webb had paid for his own cremation earlier in the year and had named Bell months ago as the beneficiary of his bank account, she said. He had sold his house last week, because he could no longer afford the mortgage, and was upset that his motorcycle had been stolen last week.

He had apparently laid out his driver's license before taking his father's .38-caliber pistol, which he kept in his nightstand, to shoot himself.

Coroner Robert Lyons said his office had been swamped with calls. "It's unusual in a suicide case to have two shots," he said, "but it has been done in the past, and it is in fact a distinct possibility."

Services for Webb are pending.

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