



B17 Pitfalls in Crime Scene Investigation: Report of Four Cases

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about 4 cases of murder in which avoidable errors committed by the Police scene of crime officers compromised the final result of the investigations

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by showing the importance of the presence of a team of medical experts in crime scene investigations.

This presentation will describe four cases of murder in which avoidable errors committed by the Police scene of crime officers compromised the final result of the investigations.

Inspection of the crime scene has a primary role in correct operational set-up and must be meticulously performed by qualified, specifically trained staff. Attention must be paid not only to macroscopically evident signs but also to all elements, however apparently insignificant, present on the scene.

In the first case (Court of Bari) a child disappeared from the yard of the apartment block where she lived. Searches were immediately made by the Police Force and continued, unsuccessfully. The only element neglected during the analyses was later to prove decisive: the sudden emergence of flies from a hole in the cellar wall. This had been ignored and the hole filled. A year later the skeletal remains of a child were found under a thin layer of gravel in the apartment block cellar. The Pathologist established a correspondence between the times of disappearance of the child and of death and deposit in the cellar. However, the advanced stage of decomposition made it impossible to establish by autopsy and laboratory investigations whether prior rape had been committed. The fundamental error in this case was the incomplete search for the body in the vicinity of the child's habitation.

In the second case (Court of Lecce), a Mafia murder and summary burial of the body (a "lupara bianca" case), the skeletal remains were committed to the Section of Legal Medicine DI.M.I.M.P for investigation after superficial excavation by the police force of the hole in the ground where the body had been found. Examination revealed a firearm entrance wound in the skull. No exit wound was apparent, but the bullet had not been retained in the skull. The authors felt obliged to make a second, meticulous excavation of the crime scene using metal detectors. This yielded not only the bullet but also other bone remains that the police officers had failed to recover. Examination of the bullet resulted in identification of the weapon from which it had been fired and hence of the murderer. The error lay in the incomplete excavation of the hole and recovery of the skeletal remains performed by inexpert staff.

The third case (Court of Lecce) also regarded a Mafia murder and burial of the body (lupara Bianca), where the confession of a "pentito" (an erstwhile accomplice) had indicated ritual lapidation as the murder method. During the excavation operations, carried out by the undertakers, a vast accidental fracture was caused in the occipital region by a stroke with a spade. This postmortem lesion allowed the defence to claim that all the lesions were postmortem and thus to confute the accusation of murder by lapidation. Close anthropological examination of the injuries then enabled differentiation between the vital lapidation injuries and the postmortem lesion caused during recovery. This confirmed the pentito's confession and the State Attorney secured a murder sentence. Again the error was in allowing inexpert staff to excavate the hole and recover the skeletal remains.

In the last case (Court of Bari), a 7-year-old gypsy disappeared. Searches by the Police Force, with search dogs (later reported to have antidrugs training), were unsuccessful. The girl was assumed to have been kidnapped by a rival clan, but not murdered. After about 4 months, a cadaver in a pre-skeletonization state was found 400 metres from the site of disappearance, at the edge of a rural road. Investigations confirmed a correspondence between the times of disappearance and of death. No objective signs could establish the cause of death or any prior rape, and the case is still unsolved. The error was in allowing unqualified staff to search for the body.

In the light of the above cases, the authors emphasize that in crime scene investigations involving cadavers or biological materials, the presence of a team of medical experts in criminology, pathology or forensic anthropology is essential to avoid missing vital clues. Both pathologists and police officers should therefore be selected from among highly qualified staff, and should undergo periodic updating courses.

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