



Pathology & Biology Section – 2005

G7 Teen Fatality by Train: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Determination of Manner of Death

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The goal of this case study is to illustrate a multidisciplinary approach to the death investigation, and highlight unique elements of staging in an attempt to disguise a suicide.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating the value of a forensic team approach to the investigation of the circumstances of death for determination of the manner in complicated or staged death scenes.

Attempts by the victim to disguise suicides as homicides are not commonly encountered, and the following case study illustrates the requirement for a multidisciplinary approach to the investigation. Professionals from the disciplines of documents examination, fingerprint comparison, odontology, toxicology, forensic pathology, and law enforcement all provided information essential in the determination of manner of death.

The decedent was a 19-year-old male who resided in a small community in the Midwest. He recently graduated from high school, as class valedictorian, where he had excelled in sports as well as academics. During the early morning hours on a day in July, 2004, the engineer of a train traveling 60 miles per hour, approximately four miles from the decedent's residence, reported that he had struck "something" on the tracks. Upon searching the area, the decedent's unclothed body was discovered. The train traffic in the region where the body was discovered was reportedly fairly busy with trains passing through approximately every 30 minutes. The identity of the subject remained unknown until later that morning when family members reported the subject missing. Law enforcement investigators examined the decedent's bedroom, and discovered a handwritten note, in block letters, which indicated that the decedent had been abducted. The note, signed "The Eliminators," further made mention that the "train took care of him" and that investigators "might find a few pieces of him left at the train crossing" at a specific site. Pillows had been placed beneath the bedding to imitate a body, and the note had been placed on the pillows. There was no evidence of a struggle, and a sibling had been sleeping nearby. An exterior door in the residence near the bedroom had been discovered ajar. Further evidence recovered from the residence was a journal written by the decedent. Additional information provided by family revealed that the decedent was last seen the previous evening following a confrontation with his parents concerning his purchase of alcohol for a minor.

At autopsy, there were extensive blunt force injuries with multiple facial, basilar and calvarial skull fractures; avulsion of the brain and eyes; multiple fractures to the ribs, spine, and extremities; and multiple lacerations to internal organs. Also noted at autopsy were strands of baling wire wrapped loosely around the right wrist, waist and both ankles. Law enforcement investigators indicated that baling wire had been noted at the residence, and later discovered beneath the tracks where the impact occurred. Positive identification of the subject was obtained through dental comparison by an odontologist. A documents examiner analyzed the handwriting on the note, and it was compared with the subject's handwriting obtained from documents produced as schoolwork. The documents examiner determined that the handwriting on the note, though efforts had been made to disguise it, was consistent with the decedent's previously produced documents. A latent print was also obtained from the note, and was identified as the subject's. The content of the journal was also reviewed, and revealed the decedent's increasing despondence and self-doubt.

Despite the decedent's attempts to lead investigators to believe he had been a victim of homicide, the manner of death was determined to be suicide. Staging a homicide may be an effort to gain notoriety, install guilt or protect family members. Following this investigation, the decedent's motive for disguising the suicidal act remains unclear.

Staging, Multidisciplinary, Train Fatality