



E18 Proving Premeditation Without a Motive Using Medical Forensic Evidence: Matricide With Attempted Body Disposal in a Freezer

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to evaluate absence of comprehensible offender motive as a factor in obtaining jury verdict of premeditated homicide in a matricide with body disposal in a freezer. Additionally, participants will be able to recognize the uses and drawbacks of medical and forensic evidence of a variety of types in obtaining a conviction for premeditated homicide in a matricide without visible motive.

A 22-year-old man was observed by a police officer leaving a high drug area parking lot with a broken license plate light. As the officer began to follow, the suspect began driving recklessly, and accelerating as he left. The police officer followed, and the driver, after attempting to escape, led the cruiser to his house, where he got out of his car, and ran inside. The officer was unable to attempt an arrest on the traffic infraction. However, after running his license number, he recognized the driver's name, and knew that he had a history of illicit substance use. His familiarity with the defendant's criminal history encouraged the officer to search the garbage bin for the household, which had been placed at the curb for retrieval. Search led to the identification of two plastic bags containing material suspicious for marijuana residue and stems. The officer then obtained a warrant to search the house.

The officer and his backup entered the house and found the defendant standing at the head of the stairs with a gun to his head, threatening suicide. They succeeded in calming him and talking him out of shooting himself. At some point during the ensuing discussion, he allegedly stated, "I'm a monster." He then directed them to a stand-alone chest freezer. In the freezer was a body, hidden by a tarpaulin, on top of which was a package of frozen hamburgers. The body was that of the suspect's mother, folded into a fetal position. She was fully frozen. The only other tenant of the house, besides the defendant, was his teenaged sister. She told police he had told her that their mother had gone away on vacation. The father, who spent a large amount of time in Hawaii, was unaware of the event. A younger brother was incarcerated for grand larceny, and first learned of the event from a television news program.

The autopsy, which could not be undertaken for three days until thawing commenced, showed three gunshot wounds to the head. The first was fired into the back of the victim's head from more than three feet away. Because the gunpowder in the ammunition was weak and the gun of small caliber, this round fragmented inside the scalp, causing no significant injury. The second gunshot wound was fired at the face, from a close enough range to deposit fouling and stippling on the skin. This bullet entered the head beneath the eye, and was not fatal. The final gunshot wound was from very close range; the bullet entered the side of her face between the eyebrow and the ear. This gunshot wound was fatal. The autopsy further showed no evidence of sexual assault. The main findings, besides the gunshot wounds and some small injuries that might easily have been incurred during struggle, were postmortem changes due to freezing and thawing.

The defendant gave a statement in which he described an altercation, during which he and his mother struggled over the gun. Allegedly, she stated at one point, while she had her hands on the barrel, "I love you," and he responded, "I love you." However, she was still shot to death. Reporters quoted the incarcerated younger brother as saying, "This came out of the total blue. ... Not in a million years would I thought [sic] he'd do something like this." How can a jury comprehend an act like this when there is no motive? Although it is not the obligation of the prosecutor to provide the jury with a motive, convictions for premeditated murder may be difficult to obtain when there is no comprehensible reason for a homicide, particularly one that ruptures a primal human bond. Matricide has been reported in the literature as an act performed by paranoid schizophrenic offspring, who murder while delusional. It has been reported as following mother-son incest. There was no diagnosed history of mental illness or incest in this case.

This case study is used to consider how to use medical forensic evidence to present a convincing prosecution to a jury of a premeditated homicide that takes place within the nuclear family, without a motive. Other points of discussion will include the use of defendant statements, crime scene evidence recovery, use of forensic psychology, application of DNA analysis, and working with a family coping with the after effects of matricide.

Matricide, Premeditated Homicide, Motive