



Pathology Biology Section – 2007

G104 Murder By Poison: Experiences of a Medical Examiner's Office

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The goal of this presentation is to review the number and nature of homicidal poisonings encountered by the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office during the last 20 years. The audience should gain a better appreciation of the complexities of investigating homicides resulting from poisoning and the circumstances and nature of such deaths.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity through a better understanding of the types and frequencies of homicidal poisonings encountered in a large Medical Examiner's Office.

These experiences may be helpful in future investigations of murder by poisoning.

Despite the common portrayal of murder by poisoning in movies and television, deaths from homicidal poisoning are rare. Since the scene and findings can be subtle, the investigation of such deaths may be challenging. The purpose of this paper is to present the nature and findings of homicidal poisonings seen in a large Medical Examiner's Office over a period of 20 year. The San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office covers a population of approximately three million people.

Poison can be defined as a substance that causes injury, illness or death primarily by chemical means. As such, a poisoning could involve any type of chemical, drug or medication and could be ingested, injected, inhaled or even absorbed through the skin. The Medical Examiner's database from 1986 to 2005 was searched to identify all homicides that involved some type of poisoning, overdose or intoxication. This was done in several ways, including homicide queries for key words and visual scanning of the causes of death. Cases in which the cause of the death was not a direct result of a poison, medication or drug administered by another person were excluded. Also excluded were law enforcement restraint deaths and other deaths in which the victim was intoxicated or under the influence of a drug or medication at the time they were killed by other means. In addition, cases of fire related deaths and deaths in hospice patients given high doses of medications for end of life care were excluded.

During this time period, there were a total of 3601 homicides. Only 12 cases were identified that were the result of some type of drug, medication or chemical overdose or intoxication. This represents 0.33% of the homicides and is consistent with previous reports of 0.14 - 0.5%.

Homicidal poisonings in general will be briefly discussed, and the history and circumstances of the 12 cases will be presented along with the toxicologic findings. A variety of substances were used, and in some cases more than one agent was administered. The nature of the perpetrators and outcome of the cases will also be reviewed.

Homicidal poisonings are rare, but by their very nature tend to grab the attention of the public and news media. From an investigative standpoint they may be difficult to detect, and one may wonder how many cases are missed. These cases reveal a variety of circumstances, substances and perpetrators indicating that there is no stereotype for murder by poison.

Murder, Poison, Homicidal Poisoning