



D9 The Multidisciplinary, Intercontinental Investigation of an Unusual Homicide/Suicide

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the importance of the multidisciplinary approach to a medicolegal death investigation and of “thinking outside the box” when considering potential avenues to pursue in determining the cause and manner of death.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by emphasizing the necessity of considering nontraditional sources of potential information and specimens for laboratory analysis in the investigation of decomposed, mummified, and skeletonized bodies.

The determination of the cause and manner of death in cases that fall under the jurisdiction of the medical examiner or coroner is rarely made by postmortem examination alone, but is most commonly made by the correlation of the autopsy results, scene investigation, and the medical and social history of the deceased, as well as laboratory studies. The investigation of deaths of individuals whose bodies are decomposed, mummified or skeletonized is particularly difficult for medical examiners and medicolegal death investigators, and frequently requires consultation with experts in a variety of disciplines in the forensic sciences, including anthropologists, odontologists, entomologists, botanists and behavioral scientists. In such cases, the investigation of the scene and circumstances of the death may provide the only clues to the cause and manner of death.

The majority of decomposed and skeletonized bodies are found in rural or isolated settings in which the remains go undetected for a period of time. However, we report an unusual case of an apparent murder/suicide involving two individuals and a canine. The deaths of the 63-year-old woman, her 34-year-old son, and the family German shepherd occurred in their home within a residential neighborhood. In spite of the close proximity to neighboring homes, these deaths went undetected for almost four years, as estimated by expiration dates on containers of food in the refrigerator and from paperwork in the house. Eventually, a former caretaker of the property went to the residence after he noticed that the property was being sold by the county because of unpaid property taxes and discovered the bodies, which were mummified and partially skeletonized. The bodies of the male decedent and the dog appeared to have been posed, suggesting that the deaths were not of natural causes. The identification of the decedents necessitated the collaboration of the medical examiner’s office, law enforcement, a forensic anthropologist, and a forensic odontologist, as well as Interpol, since the decedents were German nationals who were only part-time residents of Florida. The determination of the cause and manner of their deaths proved more problematic. Numerous potential causes of death were explored. The only known medical information was that the male decedent suffered from a chronic neurological disorder. The forensic anthropology examination found no antemortem trauma or pre-existing natural disease processes that could have contributed to the deaths. Investigation of the residence revealed no evidence of carbon monoxide, suffocating gases or other toxic fumes, and there was no evidence of drugs or alcohol at the scene. Ultimately, their cause of death was identified by forensic toxicologic studies performed on specimens not commonly analyzed, including the dried residue found in a coffee cup at the scene and the desiccated material in the dog’s food bowl.

Homicide/Suicide, Investigation, Cause of Death