



Pathology Biology Section – 2009

G49 Making the Best of Death

Chantal Ferraro, PhD, Long Island University, Sociology/Anthropology, CW Post, Brookville, NY 11548; and O. C. Smith, MD, Conscience and Science in Medicine, Atoka, TN 38004*

The goals of this presentation are to: (1) evaluate the existing notion of social autopsy, (2) modify and expand it both conceptually and methodologically, and (3) integrate findings of physical and social autopsies in order to establish a bridge between the forensics of the dead and the forensics of the living.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by providing a model that is applicable to any population in any community, the understanding of which will make the study of the dead a powerful tool of death prevention for the living.

The term autopsy most commonly refers to the postmortem examination of a deceased for medical or forensic reasons. In that context, autopsy is synonymous with necropsy. Etymologically, however, autopsy translates into “to see for oneself.” Recently, the addition of modifiers, such as social or psychological, to the term reflects the attempt to define new fields of inquiry based on the broader latter meaning. A psychological autopsy examines the mental state of a deceased at time of death, and may contribute to the determination of the manner of death, especially in cases of suicide. The concept of social autopsy is more confusing since its two applications belong to entirely different spheres. According to Rick Lavoie (2005) a social autopsy is a pedagogical strategy to help a learning disabled child to see for himself the cause/effect relationship between his social behavior and the reactions of others. But for sociologist Eric Klinenberg, who studied the 1995 lethal heat wave in Chicago, a social autopsy is a way to identify the social risks of a dependent population factors that led the isolated, the old and the poor to die by the hundreds. Although valid and useful in their own right, these definitions are not adequate for us.

The model of social autopsy being discussed originates in the longitudinal study of child death which was presented at the 2002 AAFS meeting. The original study was based on the autopsy reports of the Shelby County (TN) Medical Examiner’s office where over 1,500 cases of child death were investigated, inclusive of all manners, over a period of ten years. The “Swiss Cheese” concept elicited by the Human Factors Analysis and Classification System (HFACS) was incorporated where defects in the layers of latent and active responsibilities, permit lethal latent and active failures within individuals, society and cultures to be identified. This presentation will focus on homicidal deaths from 0 to 4 years of age and accidental deaths from 0 to 18. Subsequent sociological and anthropological research of the community in which these deaths occurred allowed us to “see for oneself” the levels of failure and the failures within levels. From this evolves an understanding of what produces not just the death of each individual but identifies patterns that anticipate future trauma or death, with its human and societal costs. These patterns represent a framework of behaviors that must be altered or remedied by the community. It is the contention of the investigators that a social autopsy is defined by its ability to reveal such patterns and to highlight the line of failure. The necropsy exists to identify this “tip of this iceberg” the social autopsy defines its magnitude.

Social Autopsy, Necropsy, Prevention