



Pathology Biology Section – 2009

G61 Deaths Involving Stress

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn characteristics of traumatic and natural lesions identified in a series of cases presenting for medicolegal autopsy in which the medical examiner determined that stress played a role in death; will be able to evaluate the role of toxicology, history, and time course in determining the cause and manner of death in such cases; and will be able to evaluate impact of such characterization of cause and manner of death on courtroom testimony.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by demonstrating how to utilize a case format series to evaluate the common factors which should be present in order to assign stress a role in certification of medicolegal death. Discuss the appropriate manner in each of several cases of stress-related death.

Although most deaths presenting for medicolegal autopsy fall readily into the categories of natural, accident, suicide, and homicide, some deaths from natural disease appear to be influenced by stress, which raises the question of whether a manner of accident or homicide should be assigned to a death that is primarily from natural causes.

Stress as defined in these cases may include participating in an altercation, whether verbal or physical; suffering trivial injury, or nontrivial injury which is nevertheless not fatal; being afraid for one's life; fearing catastrophic outcomes to oneself or another; losing valued personal property during an assault; or undergoing poisoning with varying substances to a degree which should not be fatal, while under emotional stress from other causes.

Stress is a vaguely defined word which has been used in the media, in lay discussions, in psychology, in research, and in forensics. It has multiple overlapping meanings more than one of which may be utilized in a discussion, resulting in decreased communication clarity. Nevertheless the death of an individual during an emotionally violent incident from what appears to be natural disease, without sufficient trauma to explain death, may be difficult to describe without using the word stress.

Medical examiner opinion on the role of stress in such deaths varies. Some take the position that an influence as difficult to measure as stress should not play a role in death certification. This series of cases from a five-year period in the Tidewater district of the Commonwealth of Virginia illustrates examples of deaths which the medical examiner felt were best certified with some reference to stress. The manner of death in these cases, as well as the relevant history, toxicology, autopsy findings, and scene investigation, is reviewed with an eye to developing some common factors which belong in the evaluation of a death that is at least partly attributed to stress.

Stress, Altercation, Death