



Pathology Biology Section – 2009

G63 Deaths During Police Chases

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After attending this presentation, attendees will: (1) learn characteristics of traumatic and natural lesions identified in decedents presenting for forensic evaluation after dying during police pursuit, (2) will be able to evaluate the role of toxicology, behavioral history, and time course in determining the cause and manner of death, (3) and, will be able to distinguish injuries inflicted by police from accidental or suicidal injuries incurred during the course of police pursuit and evaluate impact of such recognition on courtroom testimony.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by assisting participants in recognizing significant characteristics of trauma and other features of deaths during police pursuit by analysis of a case format presentation.

Deaths occurring during police chases require special attention at forensic autopsy. A number of issues may be raised by death during police pursuits which are relevant to the cause and manner of death. Even issues which are not directly relevant to cause and manner may influence subsequent court decisions on police actions.

The primary issue in many cases is whether police actions directly caused death. In cases of police shootings, this is obvious; in car crashes, it may be far from obvious, so much so that the question has gone as far as the United States Supreme Court. In addition, the medical examiner may be presented with a decedent who was not the person police were chasing; passengers, innocent bystanders, and pedestrians have all been killed during police pursuit.

Death during pursuit is by no means only due to motor vehicle related trauma or police shootings. A decedent whose cause of death is clearly a gunshot wound may not have sustained it at police hands. Sometimes more than one officer has shot a decedent and the question arises of which bullet is most responsible for death. In cases where gunshot wounds are not responsible, the cause and manner of death may vary widely. Blunt force trauma or sharp force trauma such as canine bites may be identified. These injuries may have been inflicted by police, by accident, or by another. Such blunt trauma may be primary in death, contributing, or irrelevant. Other accidental means of death may supervene over police-inflicted injuries when suspects flee. The time course from initiation of police chase to death is also significant and may not always be what is expected. Deaths have occurred after police chase was called off that may nonetheless be related to the history of police pursuit.

In examination of all deaths during police pursuit, careful photographic documentation is essential along with a number of other methods of documentation only some of which are routine. Collection of trace evidence may require a higher level of care than is applied in routine cases. The medical examiner's experience and judgment as well as observations are essential to separate trauma significant in death from trauma not relevant to death, and to determine the likely origin of both kinds of trauma. For example, the medical examiner is called on to identify injuries inflicted directly by police from injuries sustained by accident or at other hands. Natural disease, intoxication with drugs and alcohol, and history of behavior such as previous flight from police or suicidal ideation prior to the incident, may all be relevant; each is likely to require careful assessment during the course of forensic evaluation. Familiarity with a variety of traumatic lesions that have occurred during police pursuits ending in death assists the medical examiner with resolving questions of police responsibility and authority, and with cause and manner of death.

This series of deaths during police pursuit provides a review of accidental, suicidal, natural, and directly police-inflicted deaths occurring over a five-year period in the Tidewater district of the Commonwealth of Virginia. The causes of death include single gunshot wound, multiple gunshot wounds, motor vehicle collision-related trauma, and drowning. The documentation of injuries and disease and the process, of medical examiner reasoning which resulted in the determination of cause and manner of death are presented for each case.

Police Chase, Death, Forensics