



Pathology Biology Section – 2009

G7 Homicide, Suicide, and the Missing Mother: The Mysterious and Tragic Deaths of a Latino Family

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better appreciation of the importance of joint investigation of complicated cases involving skeletonized and decomposed remains by forensic pathologists and anthropologists. In addition, the importance of proper recovery techniques at a burial site to insure complete recovery of all skeletal remains and associated evidence will be discussed. Strong emphasis will be placed on the importance of DNA maternal and fraternal posterior testing when known antemortem DNA comparative samples of a deceased parent are unavailable.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by enforcing among forensic scientist to utilize a group approach when dealing with complicated homicides involving decomposed and skeletonized remains. Utilizing of individuals representing various forensic specialties can greatly increase the rate of success in an investigation. Use of anthropological skeletal markers such as parturitional pitting of the pelvic bones can be very useful in possibly determining the status of a female as one who has given birth to children vs. a woman who has not given birth to a child. Such information can be extremely useful to law enforcement when trying to identify a female victim.

In late March of 2007 a gruesome discovery was made by police in Frederick, MD as they entered a local residence. Discovered in the house was the body of an adult Latino male who was suspended by a noose ligature along the stairwell leading up the upstairs level of the residence. A continued search of the residence led to the discovery of four children, ages one, three, four and nine. All four of the children were found deceased and in an advanced state of decomposition. One pair of the children was discovered in a single bed covered by blankets, and the other pair in a single bed in a separate bedroom covered by blankets. Placed above the bodies of the deceased children in each room were religious pictures. An extensive search of the residence by police failed to locate the mother of the children. Autopsy and forensic examination of the adult male who was identified as the father of the children determined the cause of death to be asphyxiation and the manner of death suicide by means of hanging. Autopsy results for three of the children found death to have resulted from suffocation and the fourth child to have died as the result of blunt force trauma. All four deaths of the children were determined to be homicides at the hands of their father. Initially it was thought that the reasoning behind the murder and suicide by the father was that he was despondent over his wife being kidnapped, or possibly leaving him for another man.

As these seemingly senseless killings shocked the community, police were baffled as to the whereabouts of the missing mother. Various speculations surfaced in the news media concerning the disappearance of the mother. Some individuals suspected she abandoned her family and ran off with another man, others claimed that she had been abducted by a Latino gang as retribution for not paying them for illegal assistance she may have received in entering the US. Reports had even been received from her sister who lived in the same community that she had returned to her native El Salvador. The case of the missing mother and the tragic deaths of the father and children received so much media attention that the FBI was called in to assist in the investigation. Law enforcement officials were contacted in El Salvador who later reported possible sightings of the mother in their country as well as bordering Honduras. The plausible leads and high profile nature of the case prompted the FBI to send agents to El Salvador to investigate the sightings. Based on the primary evidence gathered by law enforcement it was believed that the mother had been kidnapped. An intensive national media blitz was conducted to provide leads to police and the FBI in order to locate the mother.

Human skeletal remains were discovered at a clandestine burial site located in the same county in which the deceased family had resided almost a year after the horrific discovery of the murdered children and their father's suicide. The grave was located by a local real estate agent who was conducting a survey of a four acre parcel of land located along the edge of a major highway. While walking the property the real estate agent discovered a skull and partial lower limbs exposed within the grave. Also discovered lying directly next to the grave was a snow shovel and a large digging pick. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner was immediately called to the scene where the remains were carefully recovered.

During the initial recovery of the remains anthropological analysis determined that the remains represented a Mongoloid / Hispanic female who was in her early twenties at the time of death. Examination of the bones of the pelvis at the scene also determined that the deceased had given birth vaginally to multiple children as indicated by the presence of deep and extended parturitional pitting along the ventral surfaces of the pubic bones of the inominates. Several jewelry items were located with the remains which included a gold religious symbol common to Central American coastal countries. Examination of the gravesite revealed it to be an incomplete burial, as the body was never fully covered possibly due to its close proximity and visibility from the highway, and the non- retrieval of the digging tools.



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Anthropological examination of the skeletal remains found them consistent with the biological profile for the missing mother. Due to the lack of antemortem dental or radiographic records, DNA analysis was conducted on the skeleton. Positive identification of the remains was established by comparing the postmortem DNA profiles obtained from the children and the husband to that obtained from the bones of the deceased in question. No skeletal injuries were noted on the remains therefore cause of death was undetermined but manner signed out as homicide. Continued investigation of the case revealed that the woman and her husband had been having marital problems which arose from the wife seeing other men. As a result of the marital unrest it is believed that the husband murdered his wife and buried her body along the interstate. Possibly despondent over his actions the father, knowing he would be imprisoned and the deleterious affect it would have on his children, he chose to kill the children and then commit suicide.

Asphyxia, Buried Remains, Parturitional Pitting