



Physical Anthropology Section – 2009

H41 Eaten or Attacked By His Own Dogs? From the Crime Scene to a Multidisciplinary Approach

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The goal of this presentation is to encourage attendees to use all the resources they may have to solve difficult cases of decomposed bodies or human remains they may encounter. These resources include: different experts, techniques, and ancillary examinations.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by appealing for multidisciplinary approaches at the crime scene including various areas of expertise (e.g., entomological, pathological, or other areas of expertise such as veterinary in this case), as the key to answer the medico-legal questions often presented by decomposed bodies. Additionally, emphasis is given to the importance of the presence of a forensic anthropologist or forensic pathologist at the crime scene investigation.

Although the presence of a forensic pathologist (FP) at a crime scene it is not uncommon, a forensic anthropologist (FA) coming to the scene in routine cases can be considered a rarity in most jurisdictions. However, their usefulness is undeniable and sometimes represents a unique source of information to understand the circumstances of death. A multidisciplinary approach is another requisite frequently recommended for the autopsy of bodies in different states of decomposition. Occasionally, more experts than the usual FA and FP are necessary, as in the case presented here.

Part of a decomposed human body from an individual, missing for one and a half months, was found locked in his home along with the decomposed bodies of the three dogs that lived with him. The rooms were in disarray with overturned furniture, signs of intense movement and dog excrement everywhere. No weapons or other evidence of a struggle were found. All the bodies were recovered for autopsy.

The human cadaver was reduced to the right humerus, scapulae, pelvis, and distal lumbar vertebrae. The remains were mainly skeletonized with the lower limbs showing mummification with some adipocere. The disarticulated skull (actually only the cranial vault) was lying on the floor two meters away from the remainder of the body. Multiple larvae continued their work on the human remains and pupae were also present. The long bones and particularly the scapula showed typical animal bite marks consistent with dogs. The skull, apart from the tooth marks, also exhibited a regular round defect on the anterior and middle cerebral fossas which may have resulted from dog clawing. All the facial bones and mandible were absent. Dog hair was spread all over the trousers of the victim.

Positive identification was achieved through anthropological features (Caucasoid, short stature, male, 55-60 yrs.) and subsequent confirmation by DNA analysis. Furthermore, entomological analysis estimates time of death to be around 1 month before discovery.

Because no peri-mortem injuries were found, cause of death could not be assessed. Furthermore, the disappearance of half of the body was difficult to explain. It was decided to autopsy the dogs and the collaboration of a veterinarian was requested. The dog cadavers were putrefied, and a cause of death could not be ascertained: no traumatic injuries, cancer, or other noticeable conditions were found. But in one of the dog's stomachs were small fragments of bone, most likely from the hand bones and vertebrae of the man.

These features, and their relationship with the crime scene investigation and police information, are discussed. Taking all the elements into account, it is concluded that the man likely died of natural causes and later he was eaten by his own famished dogs. The pattern of the bone lesions are discussed and are compared to the dog's characteristics.

This case shows the importance of the crime scene investigation. If this examination had not been undertaken, the understanding of cause and manner of death would have been extremely difficult, pointing out the necessity of both FA and FP being present at the scene. Finally, a multidisciplinary approach, in this case integrating the FA, the FP, police, veterinarians and entomologists, is the key to answer the questions that decomposed bodies often generate.

Eaten, Dogs, Death