



D28 Inadequate Investigation Impedes Determination of the Manner of Death

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have learned the importance of on-scene investigation in the determination of the manner of death.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the consequences of an inadequate on-scene investigation and collection of evidence.

The importance of a thorough and meticulous on-scene death investigation cannot be over-emphasized. The failure of law enforcement to adequately recognize, document, and collect evidence at the scene may impede the medical examiner's ability to determine the cause and manner of death.

The body of a 25-year-old, Caucasian male (D.S.) was found at the edge of the woods on his "best friends" property. D.S. was found to be on his knees with his upper body and head flopped forward with his face on the ground and mud in his mouth. The family of the decedent, reported that he had recently been arrested for public intoxication and placed on a "suicide watch" while incarcerated. The family also reported that D.S. had one prior suicide attempt and is known to have "no friends and hangs around drug dealers." After being released from jail two weeks prior to the death, he had been residing with his "best friend" who reportedly argued with D.S. on the morning of the incident secondary to "drinking his beer" and had told him he needed to move out to "watch dirty movies." No suicide note was located.

The "best friend" found the decedent's body approximately 90- yards from the house. Two revolvers were found at the scene along with two spent shell casings in one of the handguns. One weapon was found in the pocket of D.S. and the other was found lying on the ground next to his left foot and a large pile of cerebral tissue. Both firearms were noted to be .357 magnums. At the insistence of the law enforcement officer a gunshot residue test was not performed at the scene. D.S. is reported to be right handed.

At autopsy, the body was found to have an explosive type stellate, hard contact gunshot wound to the right forehead, a graze wound of indeterminate range over the right eyebrow with associated tattooing, and a perforating contact gunshot wound with near amputation of the right index finger with a large amount of soot present. No exit wound located. Toxicology was positive for alcohol and cannabinoids. The brain was within the body bag in a separate biohazard bag. No projectiles were found on physical or radiographic examination of the skull or bagged cerebral tissue.

The trajectory of the right forehead wound is noted to be from front to back, right to left, and downward. The path of the projectile of the right forehead graze is noted to be from front to back with minimal rightward and up deviation.

Review of the coroner and law enforcement investigative reports failed to reveal that a gunshot residue test was performed. In addition, the reports did not indicate that the ground surrounding the victim was examined for additional footprints.

Most forensic disciplines assume that a decedent who has been shot more than once is a victim of homicide, and usually they are correct. However, forensic literature has multiple cases of multi-shot suicides. When presented with a victim with multiple gunshot wounds the investigating agency must use extreme caution in assuming the manner of death to be either homicide or suicide. Special attention must be paid to recognize, preserve, and collect on-scene evidence if the forensic pathologist is to be able to determine the manner of death. The loss of the trigger finger on the right hand of a right-handed individual is of concern if the individual was to have fired both rounds with his dominant hand.

The possible failure to collect all of the biologic material surrounding the head wound at the scene may have resulted in the inability to locate the offending projectile. In addition, the on-scene law enforcement agency advised the coroner that an autopsy was not necessary for this "obvious suicide." The manner of death in this case remains undetermined secondary to inadequate on-scene collection of evidence.

Suicide vs. Homicide, On-Scene Investigation, Evidence Collection