



D52 Use of Dolls in Reenactments in Sudden Unexplained Infant Death Investigations (SUIDI)

Terri O'Shea, MSFS*, Harris County Medical Examiner's Office, 7010 Little Redwood Drive, Pasadena, TX 77505

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the importance of, and correct use, of dolls in scene reenactments of sudden unexplained infant deaths, the appropriate approach to use with families, the correct dolls to use in various scenarios, the benefits and drawbacks to the different types of dolls, and the photographic documentation needed for the reenactment.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by creating a better understanding of the scene through doll reenactment and photography, thus providing the forensic pathologist the ability to make more concise evaluations resulting in more accurate determinations of the cause and manner of death.

The ultimate goal is the realization of the benefit in the appropriate use of dolls in reenactments in SUIDI to caregivers, investigators, and to the forensic pathologists.

Following the premises set forth in this presentation will have global implications within the forensic community as well as with those whose lives are touched through doll reenactment within the community. Not only will the investigator gather better information and insight specific to the investigation, but, through proper reenactment techniques, proper use of the correct doll for the scenario, proper photographic documentation, empathy, and compassion, the potential for psychological trauma can be reduced among those involved in reenactment during the investigation of SUIDS. Following these premises, both caregivers and investigators will be more understanding and at ease during the reenactment portion of the investigation. These important factors allow for better documentation of the infant's original placed position as well as the found position, giving the forensic pathologist a more concise understanding of the infant's position in relation to the surrounding physical environment.

The term "Sudden Unexpected Infant Death" is self explanatory in that it describes any infant death that is sudden and unexpected. In the past, most of these deaths were classified under the umbrella of "Sudden Infant Death Syndrome" (SIDS) as the cause of death. Thus, there was often no explanation given for the death. Through investigation techniques including the photographing of doll reenactment, fewer deaths are being classified as an unexplained death syndrome, and more are being determined to be due to suffocation, positional asphyxia or the result of over-lay through co-sleeping.

In 1996, The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), established guidelines for infant death investigations. They include reenactment of the death scene with the person who found the deceased with photos to assess the sleep environment. These national guidelines should, thus, be incorporated nationally into all sudden and unexpected infant death investigations.

The Harris County Child Fatality Review Board has tracked the mortality rates of infants, documenting a decrease in deaths classified as SIDS from 0.9 per 1000 live births in 1995 to 0.25 per 1000 live births in 2005. The Harris County Medical Examiner's Office (HCMEO) documented a sharp decline in 2000 from 0.6 per 1,000 live births at the beginning of that year to 0.2 per 1000 live births by the beginning of the following year. This significant drop directly correlates to the initiation of the use of dolls in scene investigation reenactments by the investigators from that office. In 2005, HCMEO classified 0.54 SUIDs per 1000 live births as undetermined, 0.1 as asphyxia (over-lay and positional) and 0.27 as actual SIDS. Since that time, the rates of SIDS deaths have continued to decline and the rates of asphyxia from suffocation, positional asphyxia, and co-sleeping over-lays have increased. This is due in large part to a better understanding of the scene through photographic documentation of doll reenactments.

Understanding the best tools and approaches for following these guidelines will allow the investigator to most accurately depict the scene, thus allowing visualization and understanding of the scene for the pathologist. This in turn, yields a more accurate certification of cause and manner of death of the infant. There has been a reluctance to initiate doll reenactments by some forensic death investigators due to the fear of psychological trauma for the caregivers and parents. These fears can be allayed through compassion and the imparting of the information to these people about the importance of the reenactment to the final outcome of the case, as determined by the forensic pathologist.

Reenactment, Dolls, Photography