



Pathology Biology Section – 2010

G114 Hara-Kiri or Homicide?

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to recognize factors from scene investigation, history, and autopsy which may help in differentiating stab wound suicides from homicides.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by reviewing an in-depth case presentation some of the factors that assist in differentiation of stab wound suicide from homicide.

The body of a 49-year-old white male was found collapsed face down on the carpet of his bedroom during the afternoon of a Saturday in April, about twenty hours after he had last been seen alive.

The front door was secure, but the back door to the residence was unlocked and propped ajar. The decedent had been seen mowing his back yard on the evening prior to death, and all his mowing equipment was still out in the back yard. He was found clad in gray shorts without shirt or shoes, appropriate for mowing. He was known to drink heavily when he mowed.

He was last seen alive by his girlfriend, with whom he had made arrangements to grill steaks on Saturday. She came to his house at the prearranged time, found the front door locked, knocked and called out for some time, but was unable to reach him; she did not think to check the back door. She left the scene, but continued to feel concern, and at last contacted police for a welfare check. Police found the body at shortly after 1600h; emergency medical services pronounced him dead on the scene at 1643h.

On initial examination, officers found a small fluctuant discolored mass protruding from the left lower side of his abdomen, and guessed that it might be a tumor eroding through the skin. There was a small amount of brown fluid on the carpet near the mass, but no blood. Based on this information and on history that the decedent carried the diagnosis of an unspecified aneurysm, while his twin had died prematurely at age thirty four of a myocardial infarct, the decedent's doctor initially agreed to sign the death certificate. It was not until a senior officer recognized the fluctuant mass as a loop of bowel protruding through a stab wound that patrol officers realized they should contact homicide detectives.

The house was immaculate. The decedent was a martial artist, and the first floor of the house contained a room dedicated to multiple displays of numerous Eastern swords and daggers. As far as police could ascertain, no swords were missing. There was no obvious blood staining or spatter, but there were too many swords in the room to ascertain on the day of death whether any had blood smears, or had been wiped.

There had been no 911 call nor was there any sign of a struggle. A beagle dog in the house seemed to be in no distress, and had not been heard barking. Cash and expensive watches were in place where they had been laid out with care equidistant and parallel on top of a dresser in the bedroom. The only item out of place was a box cutter, with a possible bloodstain on the blade, which was lying on the counter in the upstairs bathroom about eight feet from where the decedent was found collapsed. In the bedroom, about the same distance from him there was a tray table at the foot of the bed, on which was a tray with three sheathed knives laid out carefully equidistant and parallel. Investigation showed wiped blood smear on one of the sheathed blades.

At autopsy, the decedent was muscular and slightly obese at 65" and 183 lbs. There were no defense injuries on his arms or hands. The fingernails were very cyanotic, but short and even, without chips or tears. There were scabbed healing superficial abrasions on the backs of the 2nd and 3rd fingers, by the proximal interphalangeal joints. A number of linear scars were identified on the arms and hands. Scars on the backs of the hands appeared consistent with martial arts practice, but three transverse superficial linear scars across the wrist suggested self-incision, and there were overlapping linear scars on the anterior left upper arm which also suggested self-cutting. A 3½" linear scar on the outer aspect of the left upper arm was initially attributed to an assault he told family he sustained many years prior.

The only sign of injury was a complex stab wound overlain by incised wounds in the left lower quadrant. The abdominal wall showed internal characteristics of perforation by more than one blade. The wound, which was 1" long and about 6" deep, and therefore not consistent with the box cutter in the bathroom, perforated the abdominal aorta and ended its course in the anterior ligament of the lumbar spine; it caused death by internal bleeding. There was an extensive and bulging retroperitoneal hematoma, as well as 1400 cc of liquid blood and clots forming casts of the right and left colonic gutters. The blade passed very close but without injury to the loop of bowel which eviscerated through the stab wound. Evisceration had blocked the exit of blood through the wound and was responsible for the lack of blood on the carpet at the scene. Toxicology showed an ethanol level of 0.19% by weight by volume in blood, 0.23% in vitreous humor. Of note, no aneurysm of the cerebral, coronary, or aortic circulation was identified.

In the trash can in the bedroom was a letter to his girlfriend in his handwriting. The letter was not a suicide note. It appeared to be an angry letter of accusation. However, it had been crumpled and discarded without signing.

The decedent's complex history, involving decades of training in martial arts, samurai stories and films,



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alcoholism, divorce, current plans for remarriage, and the absence of support for his remote story of assault, caused a scenario to develop suggesting that he had attempted to commit hara-kiri as an honorable way out of an intolerable emotional situation. The story unraveled at last when the family reported on reading years of his journals, at which time a manner of death could be pronounced. This complex history is presented in light of the autopsy findings and scene investigation to illustrate why this case of attempted hara-kiri was adjudged to be suicide rather than homicide.

Hara-Kiri, Stab Wound, Manner of Death