



## Pathology Biology Section – 2010

---

### G17 An Unusual “In-Custody” Death

*Brian Drewry, BS\*, Iowa and Jerri McLemore, MD, Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner, 2250 South Ankeny Boulevard, Ankeny, IA 50023; Dennis Klein, MD, Iowa Department of Public Health, 2250 South Ankeny Boulevard, Ankeny, IA 50023*

After attending this presentation, attendees will have learned possible symptoms related to pheochromocytomas and learn basic guidelines for investigating in-custody deaths.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing basic information required by the medical examiner or coroner for deaths that occur in the presence of law enforcement officials. The presentation will also provide information of symptoms related to an adrenal gland tumor.

In-custody deaths or deaths that occur in the presence of police officers are usually high-profile cases that have the potential to become politically charged events. Scene investigation is vital to these types of deaths and should include acquisition of any video of the event, eyewitness' statements, investigation of the event by an independent agency, and autopsy of the decedent. Because of the potential for rumors of foul-play or police misconduct to be propagated within a community, an autopsy should be performed on individuals who die while interacting with law enforcement officials even if the deaths seem “straight forward.”

This presentation presents the sudden death of a woman with long-standing hypertension during detainment by a peace officer for a traffic violation. During her detainment, which caused her considerable stress, she complained of having a “panic attack,” chest pains, and shortness of breath. She became increasingly confused and would not respond to the peace officer's questions. She became unresponsive shortly after emergency medical services arrived at the scene. According to the peace officer, at no point was the woman physically restrained. Autopsy findings were remarkable for lack of trauma, cardiomegaly with left ventricular hypertrophy, hypertensive changes in the kidneys, and a tumor in the left adrenal gland that was diagnosed as a pheochromocytoma. Pheochromocytomas can produce a variety of symptoms including hypertension and have been associated with sudden death. Physical and emotional stress may precipitate hypertensive crises in individuals with these tumors. In this case, the woman's unfortunate death happened to be in the presence of a police officer. Although the death was regarded as a probable natural manner of death from the onset, an autopsy was mandated to confirm this initial impression by establishing an exact cause of death and to quell any possible accusations of misconduct by the peace officer.

**In-Custody Deaths, Investigation, Pheochromocytoma**