



Pathology Biology Section – 2010

G65 Request for Uniform Autopsy Protocols on Certain Drowning Victims

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The attendees will learn indicators that may determine whether drowning victims may require additional forensic examination to assess whether the drowning is in fact a homicide staged to look like an accident. Attendees can anticipate implementing autopsy protocols that help identify the need to conduct examinations that assist law enforcement in investigating suspicious or inadequately corroborated deaths while proactively addressing potential threats to vulnerable populations of abuse/neglect.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing key indicators to identify drowning cases of interest, improving their understanding of a certain class of victim (victims of unobserved and inadequately corroborated drowning) resulting in improved forensic evidence collection, enhancing the accuracy and utility of the autopsy on these victims, and increasing the ability for law enforcement to respond and investigate viable/scientifically-driven time sensitive leads.

Use of Indicators for Positive Impact: A plan of action to improve forensic evidence collection related to victims of unobserved or inadequately corroborated drowning will enhance the utility of the autopsy, and positively impact the medical examiner (M.E./forensic scientist community, law enforcement (L.E.) partners, victims' families and the safety of both children and adults. Oftentimes, the M.E./forensic scientist community is best situated to provide investigators tools to recognize a homicide staged to look like an accident; excluding natural, traumatic, and toxicological factors in the medical cause of death (COD) are critically important.

Preservation of Forensic Evidence: Frequently, forensic evidence indicating criminal conduct is destroyed or washed away in victims of unobserved or suspicious drowning. While the accurate assessment of autopsy findings requires thorough examination of circumstances preceding death and circumstances of recovery – without advance evidence of foul play, when victims are recovered from the water, the circumstances, manner of death (MOD), and water entry point often lack thorough examination. NCMEC request consistent initial drowning examinations to complement L.E. efforts nationwide – as timely information on MOD can lead L.E. to water entry point analysis and other investigative leads prior to the disappearance of critical evidence.

Methodology Changes: NCMEC request the AAFS support the establishment of uniform nationwide protocols for the examination of unobserved drowning victims and for victims recovered in the water under suspicious or inadequately corroborated circumstances. Treating these investigations as homicides from initiation is vital to judicious evidence recovery and adoption of certain examinations (including testing for sexual assault, subcutaneous bruising, predatory drugs, etc.) under a defined set of circumstances can provide vital forensic clues regarding the MOD, and potential prevent serial or repeat murders.

Drowning, Protocols, Homicide