



G15 The Bodies of Two Missing Children in an Enclosed Underground Environment

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The goal of this presentation is to illustrate a little-known but noteworthy case concerning the wrongful conviction of a Southern Italy father whose two missing children were found dead in enclosed environment after approximately 1.5 years since their disappearance.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by warning and improving search operation, methods of investigation, and indictment process, based on the autopsy findings and physical evidence collected on the scene and from the bodies.

Two young kids, 13- and 11-years-old respectively, originally from a small town in Southern Italy, were missing on June 5, 2006 (06:30 p.m.). Soon after their disappearance, a “missing child” search began. Broadcasters promptly aired a description of the missing children pushing the entire community to assist in the search and safe recovery of the child. But every effort was in vain for more than one year. During the search, the investigators collected enough evidence against the father who was arrested 17 months after the disappearance. He was indicted for kidnapping, homicide, and concealment of the two bodies. He never confessed the crimes and he claimed to be innocent.

Three months after the conviction, a fireman found the two corpses in a subterranean dry cistern next to a more than 20-meter-high well water. The bodies were well preserved, almost mummified with only few body-parts skeletonized. Based on dental records they were identified as those of the two children missing 1.5 years before. Signs of a very low insect activity were present, reasonably consistent with a rapid skin dehydration. The autopsy showed no signs of defense injuries or ligature consistent with strangulation or captivity except for fractures of the axial skeleton at a number of points consistent with a fall from a low-medium height. The body of the elder brother (CP) presented major injuries with signs of recent hemorrhages and gut content analysis consistent with the last meal which provided enough evidence to ascertain a very short survival time. The younger brother (TP) showed minor injuries, signs of old hemorrhage, gastric and intestine emptying time consistent with a longer survival time of approximately 3-4 days, spent alone in the dark and cold cistern. No evidence of body removal or corpse displacement following death was observed. A long postmortem interval (PMI) of approximately 20 months was estimated mainly from the pattern of insect succession. Based on such physical evidence, on March 4, 2008, four months after conviction and 40 days after the recovery of the two bodies, the father was released from prison and exonerated from previous indictment of homicide.

Missing Children, Wrongful Conviction, Postmortem Interval