



D56 Forensic Awareness for the First Responder: A Sample Training Curriculum

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand some of the key concepts used to successfully teach first responders the significance of their actions and observations during an injury or death investigation.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by offering a sample curriculum for use in future trainings of emergency medical service providers and other first responders.

Fire personnel, emergency medical providers (EMS), and/or law enforcement personnel are routinely the first to arrive at the scene of an injury, illness, or death; and therefore, have the potential to dramatically alter the course of an investigation for better or worse. Information gathered during initial interactions can be of great value, not only to any subsequent investigation, but also to any subsequent medical care. The same information used to determine cause and manner of death can be used to determine the most appropriate medical response. Situations involving environmental hazards, evidence of drug use, and evidence of traumatic events are among the scenarios in which first responder observations can be pivotal. First responder actions and observations are particularly important in incidents involving death, injury, or Apparent Life-Threatening Events (ALTEs) in children.

First responders may be the only professional to speak with a victim before they become unconscious, intubated, or otherwise unable to communicate. They may also be the only professionals to view a scene as is, before it is altered by resuscitation attempts, suspects, or well-meaning helpers. First responders may overhear statements or may be given an account of an event that is not later repeated for investigators. Also, in their attempts to render aid, it is expected that first responders will alter scene and body to some extent.

The first step to improving forensic awareness is to provide training about the importance of initial scene findings, statements, and the potential ramifications of alteration to the scene. Patient care must never be compromised in an effort to protect evidence, but first responders can be trained to maintain forensic awareness while providing life-saving care. If the patient is declared deceased, the goal must change from “life-saving” to “information-saving.” Like nurses and other medical providers, EMS and fire professionals commonly participate in forensic situations whether they are aware of it or not. Although their primary obligation is to the health and safety of their patients, the patient and the community as a whole is better served when forensic awareness is maintained. The goal of this training is to elevate participants from a level of unconscious participation/obstruction to at least a level of basic awareness.

For this training to be effective, professional first responders must receive training that they interpret as relevant and realistic. Instructors who have knowledge regarding care and treatment of the sick and injured as well as experience in death investigation and basic crime scene procedures are best suited to provide this training. Case reviews are essential to this curriculum as they allow first responders to fully appreciate and personalize the rationale for minimizing their impact on a scene while documenting or reporting any observations or actions which may have altered the scene.

In summary, improving forensic awareness in first responders can enhance patient care as well as the efficiency and accuracy in investigation of injury or death. Cases in which paramedics and other first responders recognized, documented, and volunteered key information in a death investigation following attendance at a training based on these principals will be reviewed.

Evidence, EMS, Training