



### **D20 “Lover Come Back:” Rituals, Resurrection, and Cultural Beliefs and Their Impact on Death Investigation and Grieving**

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to list at least three areas of concern associated with deaths involving those with strong religious and/or cultural beliefs and discuss some potential ways of addressing them.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by identifying potential challenges facing death investigators when the death involves those with strong religious and/or cultural beliefs, thereby allowing for anticipation, planning, and management should difficulties occur. It is important this be done in a way in which the investigation is not compromised and those grieving are not subjected to more pain and suffering.

We live in a world where modern travel has facilitated the comingling of endless numbers of ethnic groups with various cultural and religious beliefs. These very important aspects of our lives also transcend death, impacting survivors and their grieving, as well as potentially impacting the investigation of the death.

This study presents a case in which a 34-year-old male suffered a witnessed collapse while playing basketball and was subsequently found to be pulseless and apneic. Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) was initiated almost immediately by an off-duty paramedic who happened to be on scene. Attempts to resuscitate the decedent failed and he was pronounced dead approximately 35 minutes later in the emergency room. After talking with the decedent's mother, who is an RN, his wife, and various friends, no explanation for his sudden death was determined. It was also learned that the decedent had traveled to underdeveloped countries in recent months and had possibly been exposed to various diseases. It was determined that a full forensic autopsy, to include toxicology, would be necessary in order to determine the cause and manner of death.

Very shortly after the death occurred, the decedent's wife communicated that she wanted the body to be transported to a private residence in the area. She forbade an autopsy in the strongest terms possible, threatening court action and litigation. When she, and a number of individuals who accompanied her, arrived at the hospital, they demanded immediate release and access to the body in order that he might be resurrected. All efforts to explain the need for an autopsy were met with increasingly angry demands. It became apparent during many discussions that their belief that the decedent could be resurrected was based on firmly held religious beliefs.

Death investigation should take into consideration the cultural and religious beliefs of each decedent and their families, and typically neither those beliefs nor the investigation need to be compromised. In this case, no agreement could be reached and having a responsibility to the decedent, the family, and the community, an autopsy was performed over the wife's objections. It revealed a coronary artery thrombosis and this was discussed with the wife. She continued to demand access to the body and after much thought and planning, the body was moved from the morgue to a secure room where the wife and others engaged in ritualistic activity and behaviors for several hours. Eventually, the body was forcibly returned to the morgue in spite of their beliefs that there were signs of life; in their view, the decedent died as result of these actions.

The decedent's parents, siblings, etc., who did not share these beliefs, were very distraught which resulted in a “Temporary Restraining Order” which forbade the release of the body until some agreement could be reached. Funeral services were delayed, resulting in additional pain and suffering for many, legal fees were accrued, and a tremendous amount of time and energy was consumed.

This case points out that in some instances, no matter what steps are taken to be sensitive to and supportive of cultural and religious beliefs, it will be perceived otherwise. It is therefore important to consider ways in which situations such as this might be handled so that beliefs are respected and the investigation is not compromised.

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#### **Cultural Beliefs, Resurrection Rituals, Possession of Body**