



D50 “Why is the Chief Here?:” The Importance of Pathologists Attending the Death Scene

Jeffrey M. Jentzen, MD, University of Michigan, 300 N Ingalls, NI2D19 - SPC 5452, Ann Arbor, MI 48109*

After attending this presentation, attendees will appreciate the benefits of pathologist participation at the death scene and understand the various roles of each professional in performing a death scene investigation.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by communicating the benefits of direct scene attendance by the forensic pathologist both on the outcome of the investigation and on the management and service of the participants and customers of the death investigation.

Of the many duties the forensic pathologist performs, none is more important than attending death scenes. Most forensic pathologists delegate death scene inspection to others or attend only the rare high-profile scenes. Forensic pathologists who invest the time attending death scenes gain tremendous insight and professional benefits.

Forensic Autopsy: It is often stated that *“The forensic autopsy begins at the scene,”* yet attendance at death scenes by pathologists appears to be in decline. Whatever rationale is used for not attending death scenes is outweighed by the benefits. Viewing the body at the scene allows the forensic pathologist to obtain first-hand correlations of bodily injuries, body position, and evidence. Many times, law enforcement attending the autopsy do not have first-hand information of the specifics of the scene and even trained death investigators lack the depth of knowledge necessary to draw medical correlations between what is visible and what lies hidden. In addition, this critical step allows the forensic pathologist to save time performing the autopsy procedure itself and diminishes the possibility of misinterpretation of findings and rework.

Visualize the Death Scene: Observing the scene allows the forensic pathologist a unique perspective of spatial relationships not readily obtained with two-dimensional photography. The forensic pathologist can gain valuable insight into environmental conditions, locations, distances, injuries, and activities of the decedent.

Establish a Time of Death: Examining the decedent at the scene allows for a more accurate estimation of the time of death. The forensic pathologist can be much more helpful if the body is viewed prior to refrigeration.

Initiate the Chain of Custody: First-hand observations of evidence at the scene in relation to the body give the forensic pathologist substantial insight and advantage during autopsy. Even the identification of evidence sometimes requires expertise not typically held by law enforcement or trained scene investigators. Most training investigations can follow chain-of-custody procedures; however, the credibility associated with witnessing the actual collection gives any resulting court testimony additional reliability.

Debrief Law Enforcement: The scene debriefing with law enforcement by the forensic pathologist establishes the known factual information and assists (on scene) law enforcement in understanding medical opinions (i.e., the type and probable origination of wounds). This frequently defuses unnecessary guessing and avoids misconceptions on the part of law enforcement, before misconception becomes “a working hypothesis.” In addition, the pathologist can provide preliminary comments (which can be adjusted at autopsy) and give realistic time frames for autopsy performance and the scheduling of any additional studies that may be required.

Establish Credibility With Customers: Regardless of what may appear to be illogical, forensic pathologists have “customers.” Family members, district attorneys, law enforcement officers, jurisdictional administrators, political and religious leaders, the media, and others may enter the world of the forensic pathologist. Whether working for a Medical Examiner’s/Coroner’s (ME/C) office or serving as the ME/C, interaction with your “customers” in the unnatural environment of the death scene creates a lasting bond among professionals.

Most importantly, the family is especially approachable at the time of death. Personal contact with the family such as the exchange of a business card or condolence allows for the creation of a professional relationship with the family, their friends, and support systems. This pays dividends in difficult or delayed cases.

Review Operational Integrity: For forensic pathologists who also serve as chief medical examiners or coroners, the death scene is where many of the important components of the ME/C office come together. It is here that the forensic pathologist can witness professional interaction between death



General Section - 2014

investigators, law enforcement, crime laboratory personnel, body transports, reporters, and others. The forensic pathologist can view the interaction and gain insight into the essential functions of the office and where improvements can be made.

Establish Credibility in the Courtroom: Oftentimes, the mere acknowledgment of having personally attended the death scene and participated in the scene investigation elevates the credibility of the forensic pathologist as an expert witness. The forensic pathologist is able to make statements based on first-hand observations, rather than secondary transfer of reported information. In many cases, the jury understands and appreciates the benefits of testimony provided by individuals who actually attended the death scene.

Death Scene, Forensic Pathologist, Investigation