



E28 Murder or Accidental Drowning in a Bathtub? Case Studies of Drowning and Non-Aquatic Homicides Staged as Bathtub Drowning Accidents and Suicides

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to better recognize signs of foul play specific to several different types of pediatric and adult homicides committed either by drowning or by non-aquatic means that are then staged as bathtub drowning accidents or suicides.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing an increased awareness of these types of Bodies-Found-In-Bathtub (BFIB) homicides with the goal of facilitating early recognition of red flags, more effective investigations, and successful, justified prosecutions.

Seven BFIB homicide cases will be reviewed. Initially, almost all of these cases were treated as drowning accidents until significant red flags of foul play were recognized, sometimes years later, causing the cases to be re-investigated with subsequent homicide conviction results. Each of these cases provides lessons learned that can be applied to all BFIB death investigations and prosecutions.

Homicides staged as drowning accidents in bathtubs present a number of challenges with the main challenge being a lack of specialty training. Law enforcement and medicolegal investigators investigating motor vehicle, fire, and airplane crash fatalities are usually assisted by crash reconstructionists, fire investigators, and Federal Aviation Administration/National Transportation Safety Board (FAA/NTSB) investigators, respectively, who typically have 40-1,000 hours of specialty training. When investigating aquatic fatalities, law enforcement and death investigators are rarely given similar assistance by aquatic death specialists and are at a further disadvantage by having little to no aquatic death and homicidal drowning investigation training.

The case studies presented represent several different types of BFIB homicides of which the forensic community needs to be made aware.

Two cases involved children. In one case, a 4-year-old male victim of premeditated homicide by his father was suffocated with Freon® with the scene staged as an accidental slip-and-fall bathtub drowning. The second case involved a 3-year-old male who was staged as a choking death on land after being drowned by his foster mother when dunking punishment went too far.

Five cases involved adult women murdered by their husbands or other family members. In the first case, a 45-year-old woman was assaulted and strangled in her bathroom, then deposited in her hot tub to stage an accidental drowning due to alcohol intoxication. This case remained diagnosed as a drowning accident until the offender confessed to family members years later.

A 46-year-old woman was drowned by her husband in a hot tub with subsequent accidental slip-and-fall staging. The first trial ended with a hung jury. A subsequent investigation was conducted, including a reconstruction that was necessary to support the statement of the neighbor who witnessed the assault but who didn't understand what she was observing. The second trial resulted in a homicide conviction.

Two cases involved elderly women murdered by suspected family members for monetary gain and staged to look like falls in bathtubs. One of the cases was an 87-year-old woman found in the bathtub filled with water in a secured condo with her face under the water. Autopsy revealed she had been strangled and beaten. The second case was a 74-year-old woman found in a bathtub with no water with extensive trauma to her posterior head and cervical spine and chest trauma. A soap dish on the wall was broken and fragments of that dish were found in her head wound. The trauma to the scalp was seven lacerations which certainly exceeded what would be expected in a simple fall. The cause of death was fracture of the C1 caused by the impacts to the head.

The remaining cases were of women drowned by their husbands with additional useful lessons learned regarding scene investigations and autopsy findings.

Drowning, Bathtub, Homicide