



E37 Accidental Trauma Mimicking Homicidal Violence

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After attending this presentation, participants will: (1) recognize that occasional deaths that initially appear to represent homicides actually represent accidental traumatic deaths; (2) understand the importance of careful scene and autopsy investigation in establishing whether or not a particular case represents a homicide or an accident; and, (3) appreciate the cooperation necessary between police agencies, death investigation agencies, and forensic pathologists in arriving at the correct conclusions regarding deaths due to trauma.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting inter-agency cooperation in the investigation of cases in which initial police investigations are suspicious for homicide, yet, following careful scene and death investigation, it is determined that the cases actually represent accidental traumatic deaths.

One of the most important and publicly recognized responsibilities of death investigators involves the investigation of homicides. The identification and documentation of injuries, the appropriate collection and preservation of evidence, and the proper communication of findings can represent invaluable components to the overall crime investigation and eventual adjudication of a case. Despite the importance of excellent death investigation in the overall realm of homicide investigations, it is at least equally important, if not more important, for forensic pathologists and other investigators to work together to identify the occasional case where initial presentation is suspicious for homicide, but upon closer investigation, it is determined that death is due to accidental trauma. This study covers three cases, each of which had an initial investigation indicating a possible homicide. In each, only after a thorough scene and postmortem examination did it become evident that each decedent was the victim of an unfortunate accident.

Case 1: Police responded to a call in which an unknown male was found dead, lying in a bathtub that contained a pool of blood. An extensive hemorrhage appeared to be emanating from his axilla/chest. A blood-covered, broken ceramic pedestal sink stand was adjacent to the bathtub. Police considered the case a probable homicide. Autopsy revealed a deep sharp force injury of the axilla, with transection of the right axillary artery and right axillary vein. Toxicology testing revealed acute ethanol intoxication. Subsequent investigation revealed that the pedestal had been broken for many weeks. Based on these findings, it was determined that the drunken man apparently fell into the already-broken pedestal stand, causing the severe injury.

Case 2: Police responded to a call in which a 49-year-old male worker was found dead, lying face up at his workplace, a recycling center, with apparent head injuries. Two distinct lacerations were evident on the left side of his scalp and the initial police impression was that the case represented a probable homicide due to blunt head injuries. Autopsy revealed severe craniocerebral trauma, confirming the initial police suspicion of lethal head injuries. Subsequent investigation revealed that the man had been using a crane-operated heavy weight to break apart metal scrap for recycling. He had repeatedly been reprimanded for not staying in a designated protective work booth during this activity. He was found outside of the booth, with a piece of bloodstained shrapnel near his body. Based on these findings, it was determined that the man died as a result of an industrial accident.

Case 3: An elderly man living in a retirement home was found dead next to his bed, with his head resting against a blood-soaked mattress. His scalp had a large laceration, there was extensive blood spatter on the walls and elsewhere at the scene, and there were also items of overturned and broken furniture. The initial scene findings suggested a possible homicidal attack. A postmortem examination revealed a scalp laceration with underlying arterial injury. Subsequent investigation revealed that the intoxicated man had likely fallen onto a lamp, striking his head on a metal portion of the lamp, thus explaining the head wound. Toxicology testing revealed an elevated ethanol level, providing an explanation for the fall. His past medical history was significant for chronic alcoholism.

As exemplified by the three cases presented, correct cause and manner of death determinations are the result of cooperation between police, death investigation agencies, and forensic pathologists, as well as careful, detailed scene investigation, postmortem examination, and toxicology testing. Although each of the cases presented was initially considered an apparent homicide, detailed investigation allowed for appropriate death certification. The importance of careful observation, with correlation of scene, historical, toxicological, and postmortem examination findings cannot be overemphasized.

Homicide-Mimic, Accidental Death, Death Investigation