



Pathology/Biology Section - 2015

H70 Savage Murder: Mutilation and Dismemberment — Why, When, and Where?

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The goal of this presentation is to illustrate an unusual case of homicide with dismemberment and to highlight some of the challenges of investigating and examining such cases.

After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better appreciation for the difficulties in evaluating homicides with mutilating injuries, as well as offer insight into the possible racial motivations which underlie such gruesome crimes. Attendees will also gain a greater comprehension of how the examination/investigation can be confounded by the different environmental conditions in which body parts may be found, which may result in postmortem artifact and may obscure the lesions associated to the immediate cause of death.

Case Report: On February 14, 2011, the mother of a 23-year-old African American man reported her son missing after his co-worker called her, worried that her son had not shown up for work for two days, which was unusual. Initial investigation revealed that the son was last seen with a White female in a bar three days prior and left to go to her home later that night. An interview with this White female revealed that her half-brother, who resided with her, came home and found the man with her in bed. The half-brother physically removed the man from the bed and told her that he was going to take him home. The suspect's best friend informed police that the suspect contacted him later the following day and asked him come to his house to help him. Upon arrival at the home, the best friend learned that the suspect had killed a man and already dismembered the body and placed the body parts into two separate plastic bags. The best friend further related that he helped to dump the body at the bottom of a steep drop over a hillside away from the residence area, where the trunk and upper and lower limbs were taken out of the bags and buried. The head was thrown away randomly to an unknown location by the suspect. At the time of discovery of the body parts, the trunk and all four extremities were well preserved. The head was found 24 feet away from the rest of the body parts and showed a significant amount of animal activity. A total of six dismembered body parts were found: (1) head, decapitated at the 3rd and 4th cervical intervertebral disc; (2) trunk with attached proximal upper and lower extremities; (3, 4) distal segments of the upper limbs severed at the lower third of the humerus; and, (5, 6) distal segments of the lower limbs severed at the distal third of the femur. The skin and soft tissue margins of the body segments were somewhat regular. The bone sections of limbs showed coarse striations and break-away spurs indicating the dismemberment tool was a saw.

The autopsy also demonstrated that the decedent sustained at least 72 sharp force injuries. The incised wounds seen on both the right and left hands were most consistent with defensive-type injuries. The stab wounds in the neck transected the left common carotid artery and perforated the trachea with extensive hemorrhage in the adjacent soft tissues which, taken together, were considered as the antemortem lethal injuries leading to the death. The rest of the incised and/or stab wounds were distributed in a clustered fashion involving the head and neck, right upper back, and left upper and mid back with relatively less or no hemorrhage in the adjacent soft tissues. Postmortem toxicology studies show ethanol: 0.140% in bile and 0.219% in urine.

Police found the blood-stained seats from suspect's car, the decedent's clothing, and blood-stained gloves in the basement of suspect's mother's house. DNA testing matched these blood stains to the victim's and the DNA in the gloves matched those of the suspect.

Discussion: Dismemberment is a relatively rare method of body disposal. Criminal dismemberment, with regard to all legal autopsies, has an average frequency of 1:500. Most cases involve the "traditional" tools for severing the body apart, such as a saw, axe, or knife. The features of the margin sections of the soft tissues and bones indicate that the suspect cut the skin and soft tissue with a sharp knife, then separated the bones with a saw. In the literature, most dismemberment is performed at the site of homicide. In this case, the killing was in suspect's car and the dismemberment was performed at the suspect's mother's house. The postmortem artifacts or decomposition related to environmental exposure sometimes obscure the physical integrity of the injuries or, in some instances, make the pattern and severity of injuries impossible to determine. The victim's head in this case was separately thrown in an open, outdoor environment. The result of this was that the soft tissue of the left side of the face and the neck, including the skin, muscle, tongue, and hyoid bone, was partially consumed by animals. The entrance of the lethal stab wound on the anterior neck was not clearly present at the autopsy but careful dissection and examination of the wound path and adjacent tissues still allowed the examiner to make the right determination. The suspect subsequently confessed that he attacked the victim in his vehicle with a stab through victim's anterior neck. At that time, the victim was intoxicated with ethanol and defended himself, but inefficiently.

Dismemberment, Sharp Force Injury, Postmortem Artifact

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