



Toxicology Section - 2015

K43 The Psychological Autopsy: Psychiatry & Behavioral Science and Toxicology in a Working Relationship — Psychological Autopsy and the Assessment of Motive

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the purpose of psychological autopsy and the methodology necessary, including the requisite sources of information, for informing the probabilities involved in death investigation. Attendees will also be informed about confounders to the interpretation of data and legal thresholds for testimony.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating how medicine, toxicology, and other forensic data are properly integrated into death investigation at the psychological level. Attention to the assessment of motives is an essential component of death investigation as well, and this presentation enables the participant to learn its judicious integration into death investigation. Finally, this presentation inventories those cases in which special caution is reserved for the potential ambiguity in motive and contributions to errors.

Death investigation confronts the challenge of resolving the likelihood of suicide vs. homicide vs. accident or natural causes. It is the ideal platform upon which psychiatric and psychological understanding can be infused into the work of the coroner and vice versa. It is also an overlooked aspect of criminal responsibility and pre-sentencing determinations in murder and manslaughter cases. Death investigation is often a vivid illustration of the necessity to embed toxicology analysis into otherwise plentiful but equivocal data. Highly publicized deaths of celebrity actors and musicians revisit these challenges of accidental death vs. intentional overdose and even murder.

Forensic psychiatric assessment draws from human evidence, namely, interviews of collateral informants. Accounting for the conflicts and agendas of these witnesses is important but does not diminish the vital contribution of those informants to reconstructing the choices and movements of the deceased and potential nefarious actors antecedent to death. This includes patterns and sequence of medications and substances ingested, accounting for pertinent medical history and timing.

Like other forensic behavioral science assessment, death investigation is a contemporaneous examination that assesses factors specific to the time of the death event and its immediate past. Unlike other forensic assessment, psychological autopsy is typically routed to consulting forensic pathologists for their own consideration but is more restricted in open court testimony to an inventory of suicidal risk factors.

The assessment of motive is essential to any consideration of homicide and as such is a component of psychological autopsy when murder is under consideration. Different source materials inform a similar endpoint of “why” and “why then,” reconstructing both timing and progression. The complexity of this exercise requires openness to evidence of primary, secondary, and tertiary motive; conscious and unconscious motive; and, material and psychological gain. Reconstructive evidence focusing on the circumstances of the death event advances a range of forensic psychiatric questions and forensic medicine contributions to justice.

Psychological Autopsy, Death Investigation, Motive