



Odontology Section - 2016

G24 The Near-Tragic Results of a Misdiagnosed Bitemark by an Untrained Professional

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn to objectively evaluate a pattern injury based on the lesion(s) present, not on rash suppositions. Attendees will learn to diagnose the evidence independently and come to a reasonable opinion absent external pressure.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by reviewing how the results of a rash diagnosis by a non-trained but important person may lead to a family tragedy and the possible permanent physical injury to a susceptible infant. Attendees have to maintain an independent, keen, trained eye on the evidence to avoid a miscarriage of justice.

A young mother became concerned over apparent lesion(s) on her 2-month old infant's leg. The mother took the infant to the child's pediatrician. The pediatrician could not diagnosis the lesions and sent the mother and child to Yale-New Haven Hospital for blood tests and further evaluation. Fearing the child had a genetic bruising disorder, the hospital admitted the infant. While being examined in the hospital, a medical department chief happened by, saw the lesions on the child, and immediately diagnosed the lesions as human bitemarks. To confirm his diagnosis, the department chief had a dental resident look at the child's leg injuries. The resident agreed with the senior physician.

This was all conducted with no swabbing for DNA, an eyeball view with no magnification, inadequate photos, no consultation with the family, and no opinion from a trained forensic odontologist, although several were available.

The hospital called the local police and the State of Connecticut Department of Children and Families, as mandated by law when abuse is suspected. The child was removed from the mother's custody pending further police and state investigation. A court date to determine whether to indict the mother for child abuse was set for 2 months and 11 days after the start of this ordeal.

Two days later, the mother was summoned to the hospital. Her infant was in severe distress. The mother was allowed to see her baby for two hours-a-day, was asked to breast feed the child, and to supply mother's milk for other times. Due to lack of hormonal stimulation and stress, the mother's milk production dried up after three weeks. The formula that the hospital provided caused severe constipation and dehydration. The child suffered severe bouts of stomach pain, had to have diuretics, and became malnourished.

During the course of their investigation, the local police consulted a forensic odontologist for his evaluation of the evidence. There were three possible human suspects and four small dogs in the house. Models of the humans were taken as well as pictures of the animal's dentition. The available pictures from the mother and the hospital were studied using the a image process software program, which was used to sharpen the images for further evaluation.

A thorough evaluation and a study of the totality of the scene, interviews with the suspects, and available evidence led to the determination that two of the dogs were the probable biters. The biting was not necessarily malicious on the dog's part. The child had a large attachment to her pacifier. As she suckled the pacifier, the attachment would move and the dogs would playfully nip at the attachments. It is also postulated that the smell of the child's apocrine glands, in the groin and leg area, attracted the dog's sense of smell with a familiar member of their family. The police determined that no crime had been committed, no charges were brought, and the court date was canceled. The dogs were removed from the house and 48 days after this ordeal started, the family was reunited.

After a legal case was brought against the hospital, a determination was made that the hospital would be liable for any developmental issues that may arise in the child. There is an eight-year period to evaluate the child's maturation before a final settlement is reached.

Bitemark, Untrained Diagnosis, Family Tragedy