



E27 Medicolegal Death Investigation: Staged Scenes or Setting the Scene — When Appearances are Deceiving

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of death investigations. From the initial death report, presentation at a scene, or investigative follow-up, attendees will have a greater appreciation of the steps which would ultimately assist in determining a correct conclusion relative to cause and manner of death. Case examples of homicides or accidental deaths masked as suicides, naturals, or overdoses will be presented, and investigative strategies which facilitate finding the right answer will be discussed.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the impact of proper medicolegal death investigation when confronting and evaluating staged scenes.

Death investigation begins with the report of a death to the Medicolegal Death Investigator (MDI). The initial interaction of the MDI with the individual or agency reporting the death sets the stage for what follows. Asking the right questions determines the nature and extent of the response and consideration a given case will receive. Communication matters, and the thread of questioning based upon the expertise and experience of the MDI can lead to whether or not a scene visit is made, a case is brought into the office, or a case released to a signing clinician.¹

When scene visits are made as a result of this initial report and interaction, the MDI must be vigilant, aware of indicators observed at the scene, and continue the dialogue with law enforcement officials, emergency medical staff, family members, and other witnesses in gathering and documenting details and information that lead to the correct outcome.

An important element in the MDI process includes the awareness of “red flags” in the interview dialogue(s) or on scene, which alert the investigator to the potential of other investigative paths to pursue. Red flags can include: (1) interviews with law enforcement, arson squad, medical personnel, family, witnesses, etc., which lead to conflicting, inconsistent, or missing details and information; (2) body position, location, and presentation of the decedent at the scene; (3) postmortem findings at the scene (i.e., rigor and livor mortis) — are they appropriate for body position?; (4) physical examination and documentation of findings, including trauma and clothing — are they consistent with history and presentation?; (5) items surrounding the decedent — are items in their proper locations and relative positions?; and, (6) the presence (or absence) of biological secretions on body, blood spatter, etc. — are the findings consistent with expectation relative to surfaces of the body and/or items in the area surrounding the decedent?

Examples of red flags in an apparent suicidal overdose case of a 39-year-old female, a gunshot wound Suicide of a 25-year-old male, and a reported natural death of a 34-year-old female (i.e., no apparent violence or foul play involved in the case) which appeared during the MDI of these cases will be elaborated upon and discussed. In each of these cases, different causes and manners of death than those initially presented were determined. Investigative insights, details, and specifics in these cases leading to new conclusions will be presented.



General - 2017

Finally, the Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner's Office (CCMEO) provides support services to the community, allowing for storage of cases of reported natural deaths while waiting for the attending clinician to sign the death certificate. When these cases are brought to the MEO, as with any case received at the office, it is incumbent that the office reviews and inspects the case prior to it being released. The case is presented of an 84-year-old decedent sent to this office for storage, which, when inspected onsite was discovered and determined, following further investigation, to have been a homicide.

The common denominator in all of these cases is the proper application of an aware, thoughtful, and comprehensive investigative and communication process which leads to correct conclusions in medicolegal death investigations.

Reference(s):

1. Gilson T.P., Morgan D., Stopak J, Carroll-Parkhurst C., Mannion J., Schaedler M., Wallace A., Wentzel J., Wilson J., *Medicolegal Death Investigator Field Guide, Investigative Unit*. Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner's Office, 2015.

Medicolegal Investigation, Death Investigator, Staged Scene