

E31 Homicide Victims in Freezers — A Report of Two Cases

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After attending this presentation, attendees will: (1) gain an appreciation for the special concerns when dealing with a frozen body; and, (2) understand additional issues related to the investigation of homicides involving frozen bodies.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing information related to the evaluation of two homicide victims whose bodies were placed into freezers.

Many forensic pathologists are familiar with the challenges encountered when investigating a death involving a frozen body. These cases are relatively frequent in geographical locations with cold winters, where it is not uncommon to investigate numerous frozen bodies over the course of a winter season. A major challenge associated with frozen bodies, which can be “rock-hard,” involves the fact that, in order to adequately examine the body via routine internal examination autopsy performance, the body must first be allowed to thaw sufficiently.¹ A troublesome problem that commonly accompanies the thawing process is rapid decomposition, which, as in frozen animals, typically occurs from the “outside in,” as opposed to the typical “inside out” decomposition process that occurs in non-frozen bodies.^{1,2} Although frozen bodies are not uncommon in certain jurisdictions, encountering frozen bodies that have been previously placed in a freezer are much less common than those resulting from exposure to cold outdoor environments. Presented herein are two unrelated homicides in which the bodies were placed in freezers by the perpetrators of the crimes.

An 81-year-old wealthy widow, estranged from family members, was living in her upscale home, which she shared with a middle-aged single man, who was a part-time mortician and church worship leader. He befriended the widow, and spent a great deal of time with her, which included numerous vacations together. The local townspeople noticed that she appeared to be missing, but the live-in friend claimed that she was sick, had checked-into a hospital in a large city under a pseudonym, and did not want to be bothered. Despite being estranged from relatives, several relatives attempted to maintain contact with the woman, but were unable to reach her for several months. Police investigation was hampered by the fact that there were no legal grounds by which they could investigate her home. Finally, a judge granted temporary guardianship to an adult son. A group of relatives and police officers entered her home, approximately nine months after she had last been known to be alive. The woman’s body was found within a chest-type freezer in the home, with numerous frozen food items covering the body. The body was transported to the medical examiner’s office for autopsy. Initial examination revealed the presence of four apparent gunshot wounds on the back. Following approximately 48 hours of body thawing at room and body cooler temperature, which was accompanied by rapidly developing decomposition changes of the skin, a complete autopsy confirmed the cause of death to be multiple gunshot wounds.

A 73-year-old woman’s body was found in a chest-type freezer in the home that she shared with her live-in boyfriend, who confessed to killing her and placing her in the freezer two days prior to body discovery. Upon initial body examination, obvious sharp force injuries were identified. The body was allowed to thaw over the next four days, in a morgue refrigerator/cooler. Although noticeable external early decomposition was evident after thawing, its extent was not severe; however, partially frozen tissue was still evident on internal exam. The cause of death was multiple sharp force injuries.

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Death investigators should be aware of the potential difficulties associated with performing autopsies on frozen bodies. Additional concerns arise if the frozen body represents a homicide. A detailed review of the two cases and the special concerns associated with frozen homicide cases will be presented.

Reference(s):

1. Perper J.A. Time of Death and Changes After Death – Part 1 – Anatomical Considerations (Chapter III). In Spitz W.U. (editor). *Spitz and Fisher's Medicolegal Investigation of Death, 4th edition*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas; 2006: Page 105.
2. Micozzi M.S. Experimental study of postmortem change under field conditions: effects of freezing, thawing and mechanical injury. *J Forensic Sci.* 1986;31:953-961.

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