



E65 Homicide in a Horse Barn

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After attending this presentation, attendees will: (1) understand the importance of thorough body examination in the evaluation of suspected homicides; and, (2) recognize that not all cases presenting as suspected homicides represent true homicides.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by reiterating the fact that certain accidental deaths can mimic homicides.

While no case should be considered “routine,” many homicides are relatively “straight-forward.” These cases require diligence and professionalism, but do not require extraordinary investigative methods or deductive skills. In contrast, certain homicides require not only a great deal of time and effort, but also superb investigative skills. Among these so-called “difficult” cases, one of the most challenging for investigators is the sexual-assault homicide, particularly when the alleged victim is an elderly person, and there are no obvious suspects upon initial investigation.

This study presents the case of a moderately obese elderly woman who lived alone whose partially nude, beaten body was found face-down in her horse barn on a warm August evening. Her grandson came to her farm looking for her after family members were unable to make contact with her. Police responded and initiated a homicide investigation. The woman’s daily routine was to attend to her horses both in the morning and evening. Initial evaluation of the body suggested that the woman had suffered blunt force injuries. Portions of her clothing, including her bra and shirt, were adjacent to the body; her pants were partially lowered. A water hose had been left running, muddying the dirt floor on which she was lying. Also, the gates to the pasture were open, thus allowing the horses free access to the barn and pasture. No obvious weapon was identified. The scene was secured by police, and the body was sent for forensic autopsy.

At autopsy, trace and sexual activity evidence was collected. Early decomposition was noted. The presence of blunt force injuries of the head and torso was confirmed on external examination. On internal examination, although subscapular hemorrhage was evident, there was no intracranial trauma to explain death. Examination of the cardiovascular system suggested a possible contributing explanation for death, as the heart was enlarged (640 grams), with associated coronary artery atherosclerosis, thus predisposing to a fatal cardiac dysrhythmia. Upon examination of the gastrointestinal tract, the presence of numerous gastric Vishnevsky ulcers suggested a prolonged “down-time” with a final mechanism of death related to hypothermia. Without an adequate explanation for the blunt force injuries, the case was still considered a possible homicidal assault, with contributing factors of heart disease and eventual hypothermia; however, careful evaluation of the trunk injuries revealed a horseshoe-shaped postmortem abrasion overlying a contusion, indicating that the horses had produced the postmortem injuries. Re-evaluation of the entire body disclosed an apparently shortened and outward-turning left lower extremity. X-ray exam and sectioning of the soft tissues of the hip confirmed the presence of an acute antemortem left femoral neck fracture.

Based on these findings, it was concluded that the woman had apparently gone to the barn to attend to her horses, having opened the gates and turned the water on to fill the water troughs. She apparently broke her hip and collapsed to the ground. Unable to move herself due to her weight and old age, she remained on the barn floor, which



eventually became saturated with water. As a result, despite the relatively warm summer ambient temperatures, she succumbed to fatal hypothermia. The horses eventually became hungry and attempted to rouse her with their front hooves, thus explaining the postmortem injuries. The absence of clothing may have resulted from the horses pulling the clothing off with their mouths or as a result of paradoxical undressing associated with hypothermia.

The case illustrates the importance of cooperation between investigating agencies when facing a possible homicide. A series of accidental deaths that were originally considered possible homicides were recently reviewed for this study.¹ Failure to recognize accidental deaths, and instead consider them homicides, can result in wasted time and resources, false allegations, and possible life-altering consequences.

Reference(s):

1. Prahlow S.P., Arendt A., Cameron T., Prahlow J.A. Accidental Trauma Mimicking Homicidal Violence. *J Forensic Sci.* April 2016. doi:10.1111/1556-4029.13113.

Homicide, Accident, Death