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### **E94 Determination of Intent: Accident, Suicide, or Homicide? The Utilization of Social Behavioral Science Within the Medicolegal Death Investigation Process**

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the difficulties in the forensic evaluation of a decedent's state of mind at or near the time of death. Attendees will be more familiar with interviewing and questioning methods for elucidating accurate information that will aid the forensic pathologist in the determination of the cause and manner of death.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing a more scientifically grounded process for assessing the intent of an individual who cannot be interviewed. Medicolegal death investigators, medical examiners, and coroners will be able to apply this process to specific deaths encountered in forensic death investigations.

Many field investigations are conducted each year as part of the process in determining cause and manner of death. In nearly all cases, the manner of death is dependent on the circumstances surrounding the event. Others not only depend on the circumstances but also the intent of the decedent. These situations often present a problem for law enforcement, the medicolegal investigators, and the forensic pathologist because a scientific methodology for ascertaining an individual's state of mind or intent prior to death has not been readily available.

Access, availability, and the cost associated with consulting a forensic psychologist often prohibit obtaining such a consultation. Additionally, the mental assessment conducted by law enforcement, medicolegal death investigators, and even forensic pathologists may be problematic because these professionals may have little to no formal education in the social behavioral sciences.

Medicolegal death investigations vary greatly, as do the backgrounds of the investigative professionals. The goal of obtaining information useful in determining the cause and manner of death can at times be a simple process and at other times complex. These forensic investigations can include various and differing modes that lead to death, falls, motor vehicle collisions, drowning, and aircraft crashes, to name just a few. Recognition of clues distinguishing an accidental, suicidal, or homicidal death can be elusive. Distinguishing the antemortem psychological state of an individual can prove to be even more problematic for investigators.

Inaccurate or incomplete information supplied to forensic pathologists regarding an individual's psychological state may result in a misdiagnosis regarding the manner of death. This could lead to both emotional and financial hardships for families. Also, statistical information used in the allocation of governmental funding can be adversely affected. Finally, and most tragically, is that a homicidal death goes undetected because of inaccurate conclusion.

A survey of forensic literature reveals few basic field methods for accurately gathering this needed information. This study presents a sequential social behavioral field methodology utilized in the course of a medicolegal death investigation. These include scene evaluation and the directed questioning of family, friends, and other individuals. These methods, used as part of a multidisciplinary approach, may yield more fruitful and effective forensic conclusions.

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**Psychological, Medicolegal, Multidisciplinary**