



H116 Distinguishing an Accidental Drowning From a Homicide: The Death of a 72-Year-Old Woman in Mississippi

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The goal of this presentation is to stress the significance of a thorough forensic investigation. Attendees will appreciate the nuances of distinguishing accidental from non-accidental trauma, as it relates to forensic pathology.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating how a forensic pathologist can uncover evidence that will prompt an inquiry or change the course of an ongoing investigation. The presence or absence of certain signs can guide the forensic investigation in various directions. This presentation will illustrate the importance of forensic evidence when determining the manner and cause of death.

On June 12, 2017, the Madison County, MS, Sheriff's Office responded to a call concerning a motor vehicle accident. The accident was reported by the driver of a log truck. He stated that he was driving by a lake when he noticed a black car, which was partially submerged. He informed the authorities that he was driving on a two-lane road, so he did not stop until he came across an individual who was working in his front yard. Once he told the homeowner about the vehicle in the lake, he got back into his truck and continued down the road without leaving his name or contact information. Upon arriving at the scene, law enforcement observed a body floating face down in the center of a lake. A purse retrieved close to shore revealed a credit card; the name on the card was recognized by one of the first responders. Authorities contacted the decedent's boyfriend, who explained that the couple had just returned to Mississippi following a brief vacation in Atlanta, GA. He stated that the victim dropped him off at his residence shortly after noon and proceeded to drive in the direction of her own residence. The boyfriend had no further information to provide.

The victim's body and her car, a 2009 black Toyota® Camry®, were retrieved from the lake. The vehicle was submerged in approximately eight feet of water and had sustained damage to the front grill, bumper, and windshield. The passenger window was in a rolled-down position; the glass was intact. The key was in the ignition, but the plastic Frequency Operated Button (FOB) end of the key was missing. The gearshift was in the reverse position, and the hazard lights were turned on and functioning, as the car was removed from the water. The car was towed to a body shop, and the decedent was transported to the State Medical Examiner's Office.

The external examination of the victim was unremarkable except for a laceration noted to the medial aspect of the right first toe and a contusion inferomedial to the right kneecap. The decedent was cool to the touch, in full rigor, displaying purple fixed lividity posteriorly. On examination of the eyes, bilateral scleral hemorrhage was noted. The autopsy revealed bilateral hyperinflated lungs, hemorrhage of the tongue, bilateral hemorrhage of anterior strap muscles of the neck, petechiae of the scalp, focal hemorrhages of the right scalp, including the right temporalis muscle, and bilateral hemorrhage of the deltoids.

It is important to distinguish the victim's manner of death. The narrative provided by the witness and boyfriend suggest the death was an accidental drowning; however, the damage sustained to the victim's car was inconsistent with the injuries found on the victim's body, as there was an absence of blunt force trauma that should be present in a motor vehicle accident. In addition, the autopsy revealed multiple findings consistent with a struggle. Specifically, the bilateral scleral hemorrhage and scalp petechiae are consistent with hypoxia as a cause of death. Even more significant are the hemorrhages of the anterior strap muscles of the neck, suggesting strangulation as the manner of death.

The investigation is ongoing.

Strangulation, Drowning, Blunt Force Trauma