



### I16 I Am Not Pregnant: A Multidisciplinary Approach in a Case of Feticide Due to Denial of Pregnancy

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will be aware of the complexity of a case of feticide, due to the particular prior relationship between the murderer and the victim.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the importance of using a multidisciplinary approach, including psychiatric-criminological investigation, forensic-pathologist analyses, radiological imaging, and genetic testing, to provide the judge with a key to interpretation of the crime.

Feticide is a rare crime, with a percentage in Europe that ranges from 0.07% in Finland to 8.5% in Austria, per 100 births. It consists of the homicide of a newborn by its mother during delivery or afterward.

The presented case regards the death of an infant found on the seashore. After investigations were conducted by the police, a 22-year-old woman was charged with the murder of her own child.

Two inspections of the seashore were made. In the first, the baby was found supine, almost completely buried by the shore and the waves. The body was not rigid, hypostasis was not present, and the temperature of the corpse was uniform with the water's temperature. The umbilical cord was fragmented; no blood or sign of mummification were present. Reddish areas with an irregular distribution were present on the anterior part of the body. All the postmortem parameters used to estimate the time since death suggested four to five days. The second inspection was made a few days later because of the discovery of a dark stain on the seashore that turned out to be blood.

A DNA test was performed and showed a match between the baby and the 22-year-old woman and also confirmed the blood found on the stain belonged to both the baby and the mother. An X-ray, a Computed Tomography (CT), and a sonogram were performed and revealed a bi-parietal transverse fracture and regular pulmonary ventilation. The autopsy confirmed the cranial fracture and that no malformations were observed. All analyses concluded that the baby's death occurred a short period after delivery, and the cause of death was a hemorrhagic shock secondary to the non-completion of the umbilical cord.

Due to its complexity, the case required a multidisciplinary approach to establish the reasons behind the mother's unusual behavior. After a psychiatric evaluation, it was determined that the mother was affected by a borderline and narcissistic personality disorder, a low IQ with high level of egocentricity, and affective and cognitive immaturity. Nevertheless, this diagnosis was not enough to explain the crime committed. It was decided that the unusual defensive mechanism of the mother toward the gestation was denial of the pregnancy. From the psychiatric investigation, it also emerged that this was her second pregnancy and the first one also was characterized by denial behavior.

Denial of pregnancy is a rare condition and remains a phenomenon little known to health care professionals. It is characterized by a woman's lack of awareness of being pregnant; this is a dysfunctional defensive mechanism that does not allow the physical and emotional development in which women adapt to their future maternal role.

From a psychiatric point of view, denial of pregnancy can be divided into two groups: psychotic and non-psychotic. After the psychiatric investigation, it emerged that the denial of the pregnancy was a non-psychotic type and was based on a prolonged affective disorder, which means that the woman was not psychologically prepared to give birth. Based on the denial of pregnancy, feticide can be considered an impulsive, not predetermined, behavior fueled by a sense of anguish due to the sudden and unexpected confrontation of the denied reality—the birth. The mother's solution was the most primitive but functional—throw out the baby.

The described case poses challenging legal and psychiatric issues that require careful consideration. In the first place, the diagnosis of this type of disorder is important in Italian law because it can change the imputation, with a significant reduction in the number of years of sentencing in prison and, secondly, because it is important for the judge to have an explanation for such a dramatic behavior that is in contrast with social expectations before issuing a sentence.

#### **Feticide, Denial of Pregnancy, Personality Disorder**