



### H84 Viral Load: Handling an (Unexpectedly) High-Profile Case

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will be aware of what can happen when a case goes unexpectedly viral and how to approach an unexpectedly high-profile case.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by raising awareness of coroners, medical examiners, and forensic investigators of how a seemingly routine case can capture the public's attention, how that interest can affect the office and personnel involved, and how medical examiners' and coroners' offices can be prepared to respond to the increased public scrutiny.

Sometimes it is easy to anticipate when a case is going to be high profile. Police-involved shootings, deaths in custody, deaths of celebrities, and deaths in public places frequently get discussed and dissected in the news and on social media. In such instances, there is often an increased awareness among the death investigation team at the time of notification of death and at autopsy to make certain that any reasonably foreseeable questions regarding the circumstances, and cause and manner of death, are addressed. Measures can be taken beginning at the time of autopsy to anticipate and respond to the expected public scrutiny so that everyone is prepared for the intense interest. But what happens when a case unexpectedly captures the fascination of the public?

Such a case was investigated by the Cook County Medical Examiner's Office. A scene investigation was performed according to office protocol and the autopsy was completed within hours of discovery of the deceased. By that evening, there were already posts on social media and in the news about the death. As the death investigation progressed, so did public involvement as various individuals evaluated the information provided by the media and by online information, videos, and photographs posted by friends and acquaintances of the deceased.

There were protests, social media rants, and YouTube® videos analyzing the investigation and those involved. Attempts at transparency were met largely with suspicion, more demands for answers, increased lay interpretation of evidence, and efforts to become involved in the investigation.

After a discussion with the family, the Medical Examiner's Office expedited closure of the case and issued a formal press release. But closing the case neither stopped the demands for answers nor diminished allegations of cover-ups, which accused police and medical examiner personal of complicity in foul play. Demands for justice came from around the world through letters, emails, telephone calls, Facebook® messages, Tweets, and visits to the office.

Who knows why a case goes viral? In this age of the "CSI effect," social media, armchair detectives, and lay sleuths, this case provides an example of how forensic pathologists and offices can best deal with the unexpected media and popular scrutiny, and what their responsibility is to respond to those requests.

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### High Profile, Social Media, Autopsy