
E41 An Elderly Woman Living With Her Dead Son: A Case Report

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Learning Overview: The goals of this presentation are to alert attendees through the use of this case of an elderly woman living with her dead son for six years about the isolation of people and to show the adaptability of forensic pathologists in the forensic investigation of a mummified case,

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating the amazing scarcity of the “living with the dead” phenomena, rarely mentioned in the scientific literature, that can be a real part of a folk’s culture. In most countries, this concerns people in situations of social isolation.

The “living with the dead” phenomena is rarely mentioned in the scientific literature. It can be a real part of a culture. For instance, on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, the Torajan people keep the bodies for weeks, months, or years in the family’s home, and they are fed and cared for as if they were alive. In the rest of the world, most often, it concerns people in situations of social isolation.

This case takes place in a small town near Rouen, France. An 82-year-old woman used to visit the city hall every Wednesday to pick up some packages. She did not go one time, which worried the employees of the town hall. They called firefighters, who, through the mid-open door of the old woman’s house, saw her lying on the floor, nearly unconscious. She immediately said that the dead body was upstairs. Firefighters finally entered the house by a small window on the first floor. Inspecting the house room by room, without any electricity, they found a body in a bathroom. It was a man’s body, mummified. The corpse was seated in the bathtub with his feet hanging over the edge. He was wearing wet pull-overs, and multiple cloths were spread over him. His hair was combed, and the corpse smelled like a mixture of ammonia and “eau de cologne.” After taking off the cloths, the investigators could see a yellow face, discolored. The woman, becoming aware, told the firefighters that her dead son was in the bathtub for six years, because nobody would help her with the burial. According to neighbors, this woman was widowed and was living with her mentally handicapped son.

A postmortem computed tomography and an autopsy were conducted on the male body. A lot of pupae were discovered, notably in the cranial cavity, but also some maggots and a spider under the left thigh. Some mold was found on and in the corps. The organs looked like a large mummified mass; only the kidneys were easy to identify, although dystrophic. The identity was suspected but not clearly determined. Therefore, the two femurs, the abdominal muscles, and both kidneys were taken for DNA analysis. On the postmortem computed tomography, the dental state could also help to determine the man’s identity. No trace of violence by any third party was found on the body, which was clearly in the bathtub for many years. The man probably died of natural causes and fell in the bath; his mother obviously could not move the body. Then, the elderly woman was hospitalized in a geriatric unit.

This incident is reminiscent of the Hitchcock story about Norman Bates and his dead mother, in reverse order. The discovery of mummified or skeletonized bodies in the domestic setting are not rare. In August 2016 in Italy, a mummified man’s body was found in a villa, two months after he died. The police were received by his wife, an elderly woman in evident confusion. Again, in southern Italy in the early 2010s, two women’s bodies were discovered in a country villa inhabited by three elderly, intensely religious sisters who developed a shared psychosis. The last surviving sister was in a very neglected state and was living with the mummified remains for more than a year. In these three cases, the main problem was the social isolation of elderly or mentally ill people, representative of an important societal ill. In this case, the neighbors thought the son was an autistic person, and nobody noticed his disappearance, neither administration, society, or neighbors.

Mummified, Living With the Dead, Isolation