
E60 A Drowned Man in the Woods: A Case of Death by Drowning in Blood

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Learning Overview: The goal of this presentation is to show how wounds on the neck due to sharp weapons cause death in ways other than damage to large blood vessels or the trachea.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showing how autoptic examination is always necessary in cases of neck wounds. In fact, the vital structures, such as greater blood vessels, nerves, and airways in the human neck, are well protected by anatomical structure. Consequently, in many cases the wounds in the neck are not the real cause of death. In this case, if an autopsy had not been performed, the police would have excluded the hypothesis of suicide because a wound to the trachea or neck blood vessel by a huge knife would cause the death in a few minutes without medical intervention.

A woman called police and emergency medical services stating that her husband had stabbed his own neck with a long knife and then fled in his car. She also said that she did not know where he was going. Police started the search for the missing man. His car was found half an hour's drive from the city. The car had been parked along a countryside road and was locked. There was no trace of the man. In the woods nearby, the man was found dead, lying on the ground, with a long knife near by his body. There were several wounds on his neck and a red foam exiting from his mouth. The wife of the dead man also said that her husband had suffered from severe depression for many years. Regardless, the police and the prosecutor suspected murder, because they did not understand how a man could run and drive after a severe stab wound to the neck.

An autopsy was performed. On the neck were several wounds that looked like typical penetrating knife wounds. The forensic pathologist examined the knife found near the body: the blade was 20cm long and the point was bifurcated. The examination of the tissue of the neck showed, surprisingly, no lesions of great blood vessels, nerves, and upper airways. Instead, the blade had penetrated the soft tissue of the neck and mouth, going through the tongue. The examination of the upper airway confirmed that there were no sharp lesions, but the mouth and lumen of the trachea were full of foamy blood. Pulmonary airways were full of blood, too. The cause of the death was established as due to the sharp lesion in the mouth, not because of damage to vital structures in the neck, but by damage to the tongue causing a large release of blood. Consequently, the man died because of massive blood release in the airways and he drowned. The release of blood started when the man extracted the knife buried up to the handle in his neck.

Suicide, Neck Stab Wound, Drowning