
E63 The “Tomato” Falsification of the Crime Scene: A Special Case of Murder

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the role of autopsy in apparent natural deaths.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the role of the depth of forensic analysis in cases of chaotic scenes involving the presence of numerous confounding elements.

Crime scene analysis is essential in resolving forensic cases. The forensic pathologist can be found in open spaces or closed places, and the analysis of trace evidence is often influenced by external factors. It is increasingly difficult to find trace evidence, especially when the scene is contaminated. In particular, it can happen that the scene is falsified in different ways and sometimes the investigators are led to incorrect forensic conclusions about false clues, false suspects, and false trace evidence. In these cases, it is important to use a unique operating protocol to avoid judicial errors.

This study reports the case of a person of Romanian nationality, a known chronic alcohol user, found dead in his own home. The scene was photographed from the periphery to the center (intended as the point of discovery of the corpse). An external examination of the corpse with the surveys of the postmortem interval was carried out. The analysis of the scene showed poor hygienic and sanitary conditions with bottles and food residue scattered around the house with glass from broken bottles and a strong smell of alcoholic substances. The body lay between the floor and the bed, lying on the floor. The whole scene was completely sprinkled with tomato sauce so it was difficult to identify the presence of important trace evidence for the investigation. The body was analyzed and externally it seemed to show no signs of injuries except for a small cut on the eyebrow. Investigators wanted to promote the removal of the body without performing an autopsy, presuming a trivial case of natural death in a domestic environment. Nevertheless, an autopsy was conducted.

Externally the corpse appeared completely covered with tomato sauce so that, before the autopsy, the clothes were dried and preserved. Only after washing did the skin show widespread ecchymosis all over the body and on the head. In particular, there was a large thoracic and abdominal hemorrhage due to blunt object trauma. The internal examination showed widespread hemorrhagic outcomes at the level of the head with a homicidal mode. The musculature of the neck and chest showed widespread crushing hemorrhages and signs of manual strangulation. Multiple and bilateral rib fractures and hemothorax were found. Abdominal organs showed widespread signs of lacerations. All the injuries found at autopsy were not compatible with the absence of data detectable by the analysis of the falsified scene. The death of the man was due to cardiorespiratory failure secondary to head trauma, thoracic crush trauma, and laceration of internal organs, with manual strangulation in a subject under the effects of alcohol. In scenes where confounding elements are present, the analysis of all the evaluable elements and the use of standardized methodologies is fundamental.

In particular, it is suggested that an autopsy be conducted on subjects found dead in the absence of obvious external injuries. Blunt injuries are easily falsifiable externally due to the intrinsic characteristics of the weapon used and to the local harmful effects in the absence of external lesions. Furthermore, it is pointed out that often an attempt at manual strangulation may not cause external signs on the neck that are visible during a simple inspection. This depends on various factors such as the means used, the force, and the duration and the dynamics of the event. In particular, in the presence of attempts to falsify and conceal evidence in order to falsify the cause of death, an autopsy is crucial to analyze apparent accidental or natural deaths. In doubtful cases in the absence of evident external injuries, the autopsy is essential, especially when it comes to enclosed spaces in apparently contaminated scenes. In this case, if information was limited only to the visible elements of the crime scene, the investigation would not have continued. The case would have been archived as a natural death and the murderer would have gone unpunished. In this case, full of confounding elements, all the limits of the judicial inspection emerged, especially since the crime scene had been contaminated with the aim of confusing the investigation. The autopsy is, and will remain, an essential element in the reconstruction of a criminal act in chaotic and falsified crime scenes with multiple variables.

Forensic Sciences, Falsification of Crime Scene, Murder