

H137 Canid Predators Kill Bites and the Injuries to Their Animal or Human Victims

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Learning Overview: The goal of this presentation is to illustrate the challenge and confusion that pet owners, law enforcement, and veterinarians or medical examiners may face when presented with a canid predation case as they can resemble animal cruelty and non-accidental killings (animal cruelty) or homicides. Proposed is a systematic postmortem examination of the injuries caused by canid predator kill bites.

The postmortem exams result from a series of deceased cats, dogs, and one human killed by canids (coyote or domestic dog) and will be presented with emphasis on specific characteristic injury patterns resulting from those bites. A thorough injury exam of the victims will allow the distinction between canid kill bites and non-accidental (cruelty)/homicidal injuries.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by a case series illustrating the importance of trained veterinary forensic pathologists who carefully examine deceased animal bodies or body parts in order to determine accurately the cause and manner of death that allows distinguishing whether death was caused by a human though acts of cruelty or by a wild animal predator as part of his hunting behavior for feeding. For the human victim, it is important to notice that in this case the circumstances provided evidence of dogs in the presence of the victim prior to and at the time of death; however, if that information had not been available, the bite injuries on the deceased human body resembled stab wounds and could have lead an unexperienced pathologist and investigators to the conclusion of homicide by stabbing.

No criminal investigation was pursued in any of the cases described as human interference and cruelty was excluded. The focus was now directed toward the management of free wild canid predators in urban settings for the here-described animal victims and demonstrated once again the importance of adult supervision of children in the presence of domestic dogs.

Multiple deceased dogs and cats were found in different geographic urban locations in Florida, Texas, and Ontario, Canada. Suspicious presentation of the bodies led law enforcement to initiate a death investigation, as foul play in the form of animal cruelty and non-accidental killing (homicide equivalent) was suspected. In some cases, veterinary clinicians in private clinics had been consulted by law enforcement prior to submitting the bodies to veterinary pathology and these clinicians had erroneously voiced the opinion that the lesions and mutilations had been caused by humans, aggravating the anguish of owners and investigators for the possibility of an active psychopath in their area. It is known and well established that animal cruelty acts are a deviant behavior in humans that is likely to escalate into child and domestic abuse and evolve to possible future serial killer behavior.

The cat victims were found either as half bodies or with large abdominal openings and most internal organs absent. The bodies, as well as the surrounding recovery site in urban locations, lacked obvious bloodstains and led investigators to conclude that: (1) the site of the deadly incident had been elsewhere, (2) the perpetrator was likely a human, and (3) the use of large tools had caused the sustained injuries. The dog victims were found without obvious external wounds and only some-to-no bloodstains in either suspicious locations or after a canine police unit had raided a property with multiple other dogs.

All animal victims were submitted for forensic necropsy to a trained veterinary forensic pathologist. The skin wounds of the cat bodies were often free of bloodstains and were lacerated with irregular, mildly hemorrhagic edges. The adjacent fur was arranged in wet streaks that had partially dried and was consistent with saliva from the attacking predator. Foreign fur was occasionally adherent to the front or hind claws of some cats. Dog and cat bodies showed in most cases the typical deep soft tissue crushing wounds as well as pharyngeal-tracheal hemorrhages in the ventral neck area with or without associated skin perforations. These lesions are typical for kill bites by canid predators. Some cat victims exhibited additional hyperflexibility of the proximal cervical vertebrae surrounded by associated hemorrhages, with subdural spinal hemorrhages—lesions consistent with prey shaking.

Asphyxiation due to these kill bites was the mechanism of death in most cases. Coyote DNA was isolated from the skin wounds of two cases. Human interference and cruelty was excluded in all cases and the manners of death were natural.

A 6-year-old boy was left unsupervised with two pitbull dogs in his aunt's yard. The victim was also known to the Department of Children and Family (DCF) for his highly aggressive behavior toward humans and animals, including killing neighborhood cats for the past two years. Later, the boy was found lifeless by his aunt; he had multiple skin lacerations and a nearly completely decapitated head. His death was reported to the medical examiner in accordance with Florida Statute 406.

A complete forensic autopsy was performed by the assigned chief medical examiner. The decedent's head remained attached to the trunk by a few slender skin bridges. Much of the scalp was torn away from the calvarium. The neck organ block had penetrating injuries to the larynx, and the mid cervical trachea was transected as was the adjacent esophagus and mid cervical spine. Randomly all over the body were numerous deep linear puncture wounds resembling stab wounds with deep penetrating injuries over the right shoulder, the back and lower trunk, and numerous superficial linear skin wounds on the head, neck, trunk, and the extremities, as well as minor superficial skin erosions occasionally associated with small superficial bruises on the extremities.

The probable cause of death was extensive canine kill bites with shaking and the manner of death was an accident.

As the child victim exhibited previous cruelty behaviors towards cats, one could speculate that his aberrant behavior was escalating from cat to potential dog killing and that his death could have been the consequence of a "self-defense" or counterattack by the dogs.

Dog Bites, Veterinary Forensic Pathology, Bite Injuries