



Pathology & Biology Section – 2008

G6 The Role of Scene Investigation in Uncovering Staged Suicides

Jerri McLemore, MD, and Steven Tvrđik, BS, Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner, 2250 South Ankeny Boulevard, Ankeny, IA 50023*

After review of this presentation, the audience will understand the need for careful documentation of a death scene and retaining a healthy dose of skepticism when investigating apparent suicides. The audience will also understand the need for good communication between agencies in relaying discrepant findings and their potential significance in these investigations.

This presentation will impact the forensic community especially death scene investigators by emphasizing the need to adhere to standard guidelines when investigating all death scenes and to treat each scene as a potential homicide. This presentation will also impact the medical examiners' offices that must provide justification for performing autopsies on suicides.

Scene investigation is a vital component along with findings from a postmortem examination in ascertaining the cause and manner of death. Failure to approach a scene with an open mind where the cause and manner of death seem obvious results in an inability to recognize subtle discrepant clues or leads to irrevocable loss of valuable information. Careful investigations of death scenes where homicide is obvious are almost second nature for law enforcement officials and medical death investigators. Similar careful investigations may be lacking where the manner of death looks like suicide, natural or accident especially when investigators have determined the manner of death before analyzing the scene. Such an approach to scene investigation may lead to erroneous conclusions in homicides that have been staged to look like suicides. Although these staged deaths have been discussed in the forensic literature, most of these cases involved the perpetrator staging the scene to look like a hanging.

Two case studies of homicides that appeared to be suicides will be presented. One death involved a woman who had recently been diagnosed and surgically treated for cancer who was found dead in bed with a gunshot wound to her head. The other case involved a woman who was having marital difficulties and was found in her vehicle while the engine was running in her closed garage. In both cases, the investigators recognized inconsistencies and processed each scene as if they were dealing with a potential homicide. In the case of an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head, the investigator's concern over blood stain patterns that were inconsistent with the information that this investigator was obtaining from the home-health nurse and decedent's grandson led to the appropriate work-up of the scene and, eventually, to the prosecution of the grandson for homicide. An investigator's observation that a woman's blouse was on backwards in the apparent carbon monoxide poisoning, aided in the correct determination of manner of death due to a more thorough examination of the vehicle, remainder of the house, and decedent at the scene. Communication of the investigators' suspicions to the forensic pathologist in both cases enabled an even more careful examination and documentation of injuries.

Death Investigation, Suicide, Blood Stains