

Unusual Inquests

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Agenda

- Scene Investigation Tips
- Accident or not??
- Chicken or egg?
- Fire deaths
- Infant deaths
- Tricky medical issues
- Questions to ask the medical examiner
- Resources

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WARNING

This presentation contains photographs of death scenes and decedent's bodies.

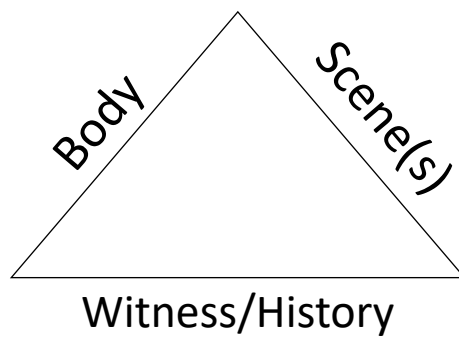
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Scene Investigation Tips

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Three parts of Death Investigations



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Body

- Be thorough.
- Look at the entire body.
- Be systematic.
- Autopsy report (if ordered).

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Scene

- Be thorough.
- Look at the entire scene.
- Video recordings, audio recordings, cell phones.
- Think about the scene at the time of death.

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Witnesses / History

- Be thorough.
- Speak with witnesses yourself.
- Obtain history.

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What else?

- Be thorough.
- Look at the scene first, then talk.
- Do NOT rush.
- Be professional.

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Multi-Death Scenes

- Meet with Office of Emergency Management about their emergency plan.
- Importance of time of death.
- Sign bench exchange agreements with neighboring JPs.

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Suicide or Accident?

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Scenario 1

- Four friends are drinking and end up playing Russian roulette. They are all deciding who is going to play first, when Kevin picks up the gun, checks that there is only one bullet in the cylinder and spins the cylinder. He tells his friends that this is the tenth time he has done this and he will “always beat the gun”. He pulls the trigger and it fires, killing him.

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Questionable Scenes

- Russian roulette
- Auto-erotic asphyxiation
- Vehicle crash
- Overdoses

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Things to look for

- What was the decedent's intent?
- Does the scene match the story?
- What is the decedent's history?

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Chicken or the Egg?

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Crash or Medical Event

Sometimes determining what happened first is extremely difficult. How can you combat this difficulty?

- Perform a thorough scene investigation
- Order an autopsy.
- Get good historical information on the decedent.

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Scenario

- You have an inquest where the deceased crashed his car into a tree late at night resulting in blunt force trauma. There is also evidence that the deceased was on heart medication and had a history of a prior heart attack.
 - What do you look for at scene?
 - What do you ask his doctors and other medical professionals?
 - Was the cause of death a heart attack or blunt force trauma?

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Fire Deaths

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Autopsies on Fire Fatalities

- Regardless of the scene or circumstances, **every** fire fatality should have a complete autopsy performed on the body.
- Forensic Anthropologists can be helpful in both the collection of the body at the scene and examination of the bones after an autopsy.

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Skin Splitting

The heat of the fire causes the skin to dry and contract causing tears, known as skin splits.

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Pugilistic Posturing

The heat of the fire causes shrinkage of body tissues and muscle due to dehydration and causes the flexion of elbows and knees and the clenching of the fists.

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Protruding Abdominal Viscera

As the heat from a fire weakens the abdominal wall the internal organs push through and become exposed.

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Open Mouth & Protruding Tongue

The heat of a fire can cause tightening of the facial features and cause the mouth to open and the heat causes flexion of the tongue muscle.

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Infant / Child Deaths

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SIDS Deaths

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Death Scene vs. Inquest Location

Often EMS will transport children to a hospital regardless of their viability.

If you only look at the hospital as the scene you may miss critical information from the death scene.

What was at the scene, prior to the infant being transported to the hospital?

- Temperature of water from water heater for scald injury resulting in death
- Bedding or other items in the crib
- Chemicals in the area of the child for a toxic ingestion death

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Tricky Medical Issues

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Tardieu Spots

Tardieu spots are rupturing of degenerating vessels under the influence of increased pressure.

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Tardieu Spots

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Tache Noire

- Dark post-mortem staining of the whites of the eyes, occurs from drying.
- Not indicative of trauma.

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Decomposition Issues

Identification of deceased.

Investigation of the body.

Scene disturbance.

Health issues.

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Questions to Ask the Medical Examiner

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1. What do you need from me?

- Medical examiners are much better at their job if they have all of the information.
- Don't be afraid to ask them if there are more details you could provide them.
- This also creates a positive working relationship.

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Don't be scared to ask questions.

- Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanokoniosis

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Resources

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Resources

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Cause and Manner of Death Resources

- CDC Cause of Death Mobile Application
 - This is a quick reference guide that provides instructions and examples of how to fill out a death certificate.
 - Emphasizes the certification of medical information.
- <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/mobile-app.htm>

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Additional Cause and Manner of Death Resources

- National Center for Health Statistics Training on Writing Cause-of-Death Statements & other CDC Resources:
https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/writing_cod_statements.htm
- National Center for Health Statistics Guidance on Certifying COVID-19 Deaths:
<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvss/vsrg/vsrg03-508.pdf>
- CDC “blue sheets” (natural deaths):
https://www.dshs.texas.gov/uploadedFiles/Content/Chief_Operating_Officer/vs/field/TxEVER/blue_form.pdf
- CDC “red sheets” (unnatural deaths):
https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/red_form.pdf