



Some Meaningful Points on Suicidal Death Crime Scene Investigation

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Abstract

Death investigation is a complicated process, which involves several different members of the police, medicolegal experts and forensic experts. Finding every important detail, however small it might be, is very important in crime scene forensic investigation. The experienced observer is quick to recognize the suicide which has been tampered with in the attempt to create the impression of a homicide or vice versa, usually for purposes of collecting insurance, or the homicidal case which has been altered to make it resemble a suicidal, accidental or natural death. This study highlights some meaningful points on suicidal death crime scene investigation.

Keywords: Suicide; Crime Scene Investigation

Introduction

Different responsibilities and miscommunications among the police officers, medicolegal examiners, forensic experts, prosecutors and others involved in the process at crime scene investigation results in serious errors which affect the outcome of the cases. If a case is reported as a "Suicide," the police officers who respond as well as the investigators automatically tend to treat it as a suicide. Experts must keep an open mind and not be influenced either by the initial reports or the presentation in the crime scene. A forensic expert must respond to every unattended death scene, whether it was reported as a homicide, suicide, accident or natural to assure that any potential crime scene and/or evidence surrounding the event was not disturbed. Anything and everything should be considered as evidence whether these are physical or testimonial, it must be preserved, noted, and brought to the attention of the investigators. In many suicide cases where it was apparent that the investigators did not take each point to its conclusion due to insufficient photographs and certain tests were not conducted. Death investigations of the elderly are often assumed to be natural and there is a tendency on the part of uniforms and experts to rush-through the crime scene process. Many investigators, due to the initial call treated the cases like a routine suicide or a natural death,

but they greatly embarrassed when the medicolegal examiner's finding showed the death to be a homicide [1-7].

Some Meaningful Points Hanging Related Crime Scenes

In the crime scene of hanging first location is important i.e. crime scene is indoor or outdoor. If outdoor crime scene is then type of anchor plays an important role i.e. tree, pole etc. Some of the important points are as follows

- a) If anchor is tree, then detailed account of the tree must be taken in the account like specific characteristics thorns, latex over the trunk or leaves etc. because sometimes these creates special marks on the body. The cloth of deceased possesses any marks of thorn/any latex is present which resembles the tree. The hand and shoes of deceased possess any latex of trunk of tree or thorn, which indicates that the deceased has attempted to climb over the tree. The hanging complete or partial are important. The approximate time of incident may be decided based on rigor mortis present or absent, purification of body started or not, any pool of decomposed body fluid is present at floor or not also equally important.

- b) Capacity of anchor (is it capable to provide enough strength to ligature).
- c) Type of ligature material and their specific description. Whether the ligature has been used single or double. The presence of some fibers over the hand of deceased which resembles the ligature material. Type of knot, applied to tie the ligature material with anchor (tree or anything else) is it possible to tie such type of knot without climbing over the tree? Depth and intensity of ligature mark. Location and shape of ligature mark and whether the marks are continued around the neck or not. Presence of ecchymoses and abrasion around the ligature marks.
- d) The mark of friction of pulling of ligature through the anchor (tree) if present (Indicates the body has been pulled by someone). If not possible then any support has been used to climb or any ladder if available at spot.
- e) Relative position of neck with respect to knot tied around the neck. Type of knot used around the neck and their position. Neck is elongated or not?
- f) Position of eyes (opened or closed or opened slit like). Whether any difference exist in the opening of eyes i.e., the eye toward the ligature knot is more opened or not. The petechial hemorrhage if present inside the eyes.
- g) Dribbling of saliva is present or not? If absent, then evidences of salivation present over the clothes. the face is placid or pale? The tongue is drawn in, or caught between the teeth or protruded? Presence of bloody froth if coming out from the nose or mouth.
- h) The palms of hands are clinched or opened.
- i) Escape of urine or fecal matter and the direction of flow i.e. downward or lateral flow.
- j) Presence of post mortem staining in the arms and legs of the body.
- k) Existence of marks of struggle, presence of marks of nails, external injuries.
- l) Height of the deceased and anchor. Distance between the toes and floor. Position of shoes and socks. Distance between the knot tied with anchor and over the neck
- m) Any documental/tattoo/evidence through which identity could be established.

The Suicide as a Homicide Investigation

According to literature, "All death inquiries should be conducted as homicide investigations until the facts prove differently. The resolution of the mode of death as suicide is based on a series of factors which eliminate homicide, accident and natural causes of death. It is recommended that an investigator to be assigned to

every unattended death case. Sometimes authorities mistakenly allowed patrol officers to conduct basic death investigations with the assumption that such deaths are generally not criminal incidents and don't require investigation. On the contrary, these cases may very well be homicides, which have been staged to appear to be suicide, accidents or natural causes. In a case a lady living in city apartment was discovered hanging by her neck from the shower in her bathroom. The case was reported as a suicide by the person discovering her body and the initial police officers had reported the case as a suicide. When crime scene experts examined the body of the victim, they found an ante-mortem injury to her face and noticed a Red chief @ shoe print on the bucket and the toilet seat. The deceased was barefooted and could not have caused that impression. The crime scene experts lifted the footwear impression as a piece of evidence as the officers conducted their canvass of the apartment and questioned the victim's relatives and friends. Basically, they determined that the victim did not fit any "suicide profile" and the death was in fact suspicious. Experts during investigation of case found that a 29-year old person who had been working in the adjoining apartment had got into a verbal dispute with the victim over the noise that he was making and angry words had been exchanged earlier that same day. The plumber had left the apartment shortly thereafter and failed to notify his owner. When the experts located him at a friend's residence, he admitted that he had killed the woman by strangling her and then cleverly "staged" the scene by hanging her from the shower making it appear that she had committed suicide. For him to lift her into that position he had to stand on the bucket and toilet seat there by leaving several footwear impressions, which matched his Red chief @ shoe print.

Some Meaningful Points on Suicide Investigation

One of the most significant factors to consider in any death investigation is victimology. Victimology as it pertains to both suicide and homicide investigations is significant in ascertaining motives, suspects and risk factors. In suicide cases, this becomes paramount in determining motive and intent. Does the victim fit a "Suicide Profile?" Was there any evidence of marked depression or suicide ideations? Did the victim have both short- and long-term plans? Victimology is the collection and assessment of all significant information as it relates to the victim and his or her lifestyle. personality, employment, education, friends, habits, hobbies, marital status, relationships, dating history, sexuality, reputation, criminal record, history of alcohol or drugs, physical condition and neighborhood of residence are all pieces of the mosaic that comprise victimology.

The Basic Investigative Considerations for Establishment of the Death as Suicidal in Nature

The crime scene expert must be aware of following basic considerations to establish if a death is suicidal in nature.

- a) The presence of the weapon or means of death at the scene.

- b) Injuries or wounds that are obviously self-inflicted or could have been inflicted by the deceased.
- c) The existence of a motive or intent on the part of the victim to take his or her own life.

The Weapon and Wounds

The weapon or means of death should be present in cases of suicide however, the absence of a weapon does not necessarily indicate that death was due to a homicide. The weapon could have been stolen or otherwise disposed of prior to the arrival of the authorities. Furthermore, family members have been known to conceal weapons and/or suicide notes in order to collect on an insurance policy. Injuries and wounds in suicides may be very similar to those observed in homicides. However, certain observations that the wounds found on the body are consistent with homicide or suicide should be made. For example, a person found dead from multiple stab wounds of the back would certainly not be considered a victim of suicide. It's not the number of wounds that are self-inflicted, but the lethality of these wounds and what organs have been impacted. Some information is important like the deceased cause the injuries and death? The person physically able to accomplish the act? Are the wounds within the reach of the deceased?

Motive or Intent and Factors for Ultimate Results

The manner of death may be important in determining suicidal intent. People who hang themselves or jump to their deaths certainly have indicated an intention to take their lives. Similarly, deaths that involve a combination of methods, such as poisoning, shooting, slashing of wrists, inhaling gas, etc. show an extreme desire to die. Some information to be collected like medical, social, family history and previous suicidal attempts. If the victim left a note and the case is a suicide, obtain an exemplar (An example of the victim's handwriting from some document that was known to have been written by the deceased.) this is necessary specially to get rid future dispute. The presence of a Suicide note certainly suggests suicide. However, there are several investigative considerations to determine whether the note is genuine, was it written voluntarily

by the deceased and the note indicate suicidal intent? Suicide notes often have mixed emotional content including "positive" and "negative" feelings. The Suicide Note is a direct communication indicating intent to commit suicide. The notes are often coherent and legible unless written under the influence of alcohol or drugs and may be instructional and/or admonishing. These notes should be collected in a manner to preserve any latent fingerprints and exemplars should be obtained for comparison. The note often provides a basis of inquiry into the background of the deceased. In suicide cases the application of a "Psychological Autopsy" might be useful in drawing important conclusions.

Conclusion

It should be noted that the final determination of suicide is made by the medicolegal examiner after all the facts are evaluated. However, the investigation at the scene and an inquiry into the back-ground of the deceased may indicate the presence of life-threatening behavior or activities that suggest suicidal intent. Of course, the medicolegal examiner is supposed to avail him or her of the input of the investigators, who were present at the scene and conducted the death investigation.

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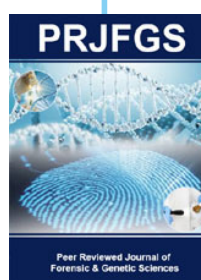
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