

BOOK REVIEW

C. S. Hirsch,¹ M.D.

A Review of *Homicide Investigation*

REFERENCE: Snyder, Lemoyne, *Homicide Investigation*, 3rd ed., Charles C Thomas, Springfield, Ill., 1977, 397 pages, no price listed.

Review of the third edition of a popular book entails two separate tasks, one objective and the second subjective. Objectively, how does the new edition differ from its immediate predecessor? Subjectively, what does the reviewer think of the content, regardless of the edition number?

The only conspicuous difference between the second and third editions is a deletion of the chapter on criminal abortion. Otherwise, a page-by-page comparison leads me to estimate that approximately 99% of the text is unaltered. Furthermore, 162 of the 163 figures in the book are unchanged from the previous edition. Unfortunately, several formerly acceptable color illustrations have acquired a distracting, ghastly blue hue in the third edition. Obviously, the publisher's dust-jacket claim that the book has undergone a "complete revision and updating" is nonsense.

From my personal standpoint, the book should be criticized from two points of view, one specific and the second general. Specifically, *Homicide Investigation* is badly in need of revision and updating. It contains material that either has been outdated for years or is clearly wrong. A personal favorite is worth quoting: "Another type of homicide with which the officer should become familiar is that committed by an adult who suddenly becomes maniacal and kills a person for no apparent reason. These murderers are generally apprehended immediately and should be given a thorough physical examination at once, because they frequently are suffering from an *acute infectious disease*" [italics added]. I don't know if this statement was true in the pre-antibiotic era; if so, it reminds us, at best, of an historical aspect of homicide investigation which we no longer see.

A general criticism of this book concerns its subtle potential for misinterpretation and abuse by the unsophisticated reader. Sections on technically difficult, complicated subjects seem to me tainted by dogmatic oversimplification. The section on rigor mortis is a good example. The variability in rate of onset and disappearance of rigor mortis is mentioned in a general discussion of its use in estimating the time of death. However, the same section contains a boldface-type example that estimates the time of death on the basis of firm rigor mortis in the thighs and legs of a decedent whose neck and shoulders are limp. The example concludes with the statement that "it becomes obvious that death took place in such a case in the neighborhood of twenty-nine to thirty-four hours previously." It certainly isn't obvious to me, and I fear that inexperienced persons (police officers, attorneys, or physicians) might be misled by fixation of their attention on such an example. Elsewhere in the same section a rather famous mistake is repeated when the author opines that rigor mortis has a more rapid onset when the body is chilled after death. If this were

¹ Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office, 2121 Adelbert Rd., Cleveland, Ohio 44106.

true, rigor mortis would qualify as the only known chemical reaction in the universe which is hastened by cold and retarded by heat. Lastly, the section fails to mention the usefulness of inappropriate rigor mortis when the scene of discovery of the body is not the place of death.

Many sections of this book lend themselves to the type of technical criticism just rendered, but this would simply belabor the issue. The book would have less potential for abuse if more "grains of salt" were sprinkled on its pages.

The foregoing criticisms notwithstanding, *Homicide Investigation* has many fine qualities and espouses a lot of good sense. I believe that its strengths overpower its weaknesses, and predict that it will continue to enjoy popularity, particularly for its primary audience, the police officer. However, in all candor, Spitz and Fisher's *Medico-legal Investigation of Death* and Adelson's *Pathology of Homicide* are far better books.