

## BOOK REVIEW

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### A Review of: Cause of Death

**REFERENCE:** Wecht, C., Curriden, M., and Wecht, B. (Dutton New York, NY 1993); 314 pages; \$23.00.

Cause of Death, is a fascinating account of the details of a dozen of the more famous forensic cases that have been debated in the recent past. This inside account of those cases, as viewed by Dr. Cyril Wecht, a forensic pathologist of unquestioned ability is presented in an easy to read and compelling style by Dr. Wecht and his co-authors, son Benjamin Wecht and legal writer, Mark Curriden.

Dr. Wecht's distinguished professional career included consultation in the forensic work-up of all of the cases described, with the exception of the John F. Kennedy assassination, where he reviewed the room full of materials as an outside expert. All experienced forensic scientists have witnessed some medical incompetence, some investigatory bumbling, and some prosecutorial missteps over the course of their careers. The authors expose it all in this fascinating book. Dr. Wecht, also an attorney, empathizes with and appreciates certain legitimate defense frustrations. However, in cases where life and/or liberty is at stake, he does not suffer fools graciously. Medical incompetence is criticized and rightfully so. Investigatory negligence is condemned and lest anyone worry in advance, the legal profession is not portrayed as a group of knights in shining armor.

The book opens with a detailed and comprehensive review of the most controversial assassination in history. The "Great American Murder Mystery: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy" is an exhaustive review of the Kennedy autopsy photographs, the Warren Commission report, and the so called "magic bullet." What should have been the most thorough, complete, and accurate investigation and forensic autopsy in history, was anything but. The book ends with a chronology of events that relate to the search for the still missing brain of John F. Kennedy.

In "Evidence Of A Second Gun: The Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy," the author's conclusion will surprise most readers including those who believe that they were familiar with all of the details in that much publicized trial. In "Chappaquiddick Revisited: The Death of Mary Jo Kopechne," the authors review some of the unfortunate results that can occur when a local coroner system does not have a competent forensic pathology resource to rely on in cases of deaths occurring under unusual circumstances. In

another high profile case, that of the homicide trial of Dr. Jeffrey MacDonald, Dr. Wecht's review of the evidence used to convict Dr. MacDonald raises doubt about the incontrovertibility of the so called scientific evidence. In "Covering Up For The King: The Death of Elvis Presley," we read about medical cover-up, and in the same case learn of some superior trial advocacy in this fascinating chapter on the death of Elvis Presley and how the medical facts of his cause of death eventually surfaced.

Three cases involved high profile victims of lovers where the trial tactics make for great reading and demonstrate the different legal results that can occur in cases having many similarities. Those cases involved the trials of Jean Harris, who was convicted of murdering Dr. Herman Tarnower, the trial and eventual acquittal of Claus VonBulow, who was charged with the attempted murder of his wife, and finally, the trial of a successful surgeon who was convicted of killing his invalid wife.

No class of crimes angers sensible beings more than does child abuse. However, in the case of Karen and Michael Diehl, two young adoptive parents face lengthy prison terms as a result of the death of one their troubled adoptees, and one wonders who the real victim was in this case. As a result of these convictions, the effective, albeit unusual lifestyle that had been constructed fell apart for the remaining 15 adopted children, many of whom had troubled pasts prior to being adopted by the Diehls.

The "Best Brothers" case deals with the defense of the quintessential underdog. In this case an elderly bachelor, unschooled and bordering on being mentally retarded, a partial recluse, living in a rural community faced the heavy charge of murder and was up against the power of the establishment. The legal shenanigans in this case give all lawyers a bad name.

The book concludes with the discussion of two unusual death investigations from the home area of Dr. Wecht, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. While these two cases were not nationally publicized, they are two of the best chapters in terms of super scientific sleuthing by a renowned forensic pathologist. The investigatory neglect involving the death of a young college student and the mysterious death of a prominent auto dealer are covered in detail that will pull the reader from page to page.

The book is solid from the first to the last chapter. Once into it, it is impossible to put it down. We all have some knowledge from the popular press and our Forensic Sciences Academy meetings on many of the cases covered in this fascinating book. Even those of us who enjoyed some behind-the-scenes knowledge of certain cases will be surprised at some medical details that did not see the light of day at the time that the cases were prosecuted and were on the front page of everyone's local newspaper. The chapters

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are as varied as are the circumstances of death of the victims. The authors have dissected and presented the controversies in the selected few high profile cases most artfully. Regardless of whether it is rank wrong doing by persons clothed with certain official status, gross incompetence, or Keystone Cops bumbling, it is all

exposed for the reader to draw their own conclusions. Of penultimate importance to Dr. Wecht is arriving at a proper medical diagnosis based on the scientific evidence. That evidence should lead us to one conclusion, which is the truth. No matter what your background or experience, you will enjoy reading Cause of Death.