

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of *Criminal Poisoning: Investigational Guide for Law Enforcement, Toxicologists, Forensic Scientists, and Attorneys*

REFERENCE: Trestrail, JH III. *Criminal poisoning: investigational guide for law enforcement, toxicologists, forensic scientists, and attorneys*. Humana Press, Totowa New Jersey, 2000, 164 pp.

Deaths by homicidal poisoning, which are recognized as such, constitute a very small fraction of all poisoning deaths in the United States representing, according to this book, 14 poisonings per 10 000 homicides. The caveat however is critical, since as the author points out, murder by poisoning can be among the most difficult murders to identify. Of the cases discussed in this book, the vast majority involve the use of a classical poison, such as arsenic, cyanide, or strychnine, which makes them easier to identify. Poisoning using a drug which a decedent has been prescribed or has had access to, however, certainly cannot be distinguished from a voluntary ingestion on the basis of the toxicology laboratory result, and the only people who know whether the drug was willingly ingested by the victim, or administered by a poisoner, are usually these two actors, one of whom is invariably dead.

John Trestrail III, a pharmacist and clinical toxicologist with over 20 years experience as director of a major certified poison control center, has studied criminal poisonings and presents here a synopsis of his experience as a consultant to law enforcement agencies in homicidal and criminal poisoning investigations.

His book is an interesting, browsable, text on the overall criminology of poisoning. It begins with brief historical snapshots of some famous poisoners, from the ancient Sumerians, through the Borgias, to Crippen and George Trepal, the Coca Cola Thallium poisoner. This was the most comprehensive and interesting section, but leaves the reader wanting to know more. Although published this year, there is little material post 1991, omitting for example,

any mention of interesting recent cases such as the Tokyo subway Sarin poisonings. The patterns of motive, opportunity, and *modus operandi*, which emerge from these histories, are seen to repeat over and over in subsequent cases. The section also dispels the widely held belief that most poisoners are women. This opening chapter is followed by sections dealing with types of poisoners, characteristics of poisoning victims, scene investigation, autopsy, and prosecution. These chapters are brief, somewhat lacking in foundation in areas, but give a good overall perspective on what we know about the factors and situations that lead some misguided individuals to become poisoners.

As its subtitle suggests, this is not a primary resource on toxicology, psychology, or crime scene investigation, lacking the depth in any single area to make it a textbook or manual. For example, analytical toxicology is dealt with specifically in one page, and bemoans the fact that current technology does not extend to the *Star Trek* "tricorder," for rapid drug screening. Symptomatology of various poisonings is discussed throughout, usually in the context of a case, and in tabulated form in an appendix, but never in sufficient detail to replace standard texts on the clinical diagnosis of poisoning. The book has its utility as a starting point for the individual who finds him or herself in the middle of a poisoning investigation or prosecution, and wants to place it in the context of previously identified similar cases. Some of the warnings about the difficulty of detecting these kinds of cases, and the need to think outside the box both in the field and in the laboratory, would be good advice for any practicing postmortem forensic toxicologist or investigator.

Among the best features of the book is its extensive bibliographies (50 pages) of historical and contemporary literature on poisoning and poisoners, most of which would never be turned up in a Medline search. Among its weaknesses is an almost complete lack of references in the text to connect to the bibliography, although each chapter does end with a short list of suggested readings.

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