

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Investigating Infant Deaths*

REFERENCE: O'Neal BJ. Investigating infant deaths. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2007; 226 pp.

An apparently healthy infant dying suddenly and unexpectedly is a tremendous blow and tragedy for the parents, family, relatives, and caregiver. The shock, confusion, and grief that follows within the family after emergency and hospital personnel have departed and the family is left alone is almost always followed by the next step—the infant death investigation. The author presents her professional experience and her coroner's office policy and procedure for the investigation of infant's sudden death. The author's qualifications are extensive as she is a certified death investigator and forensic nurse in Charleston County, South Carolina, and has served on numerous infant death committees, including the Center for Disease Control's Sudden Unexplained Infant Death Initiative (SUIDI), currently being implemented in the United States (<http://www.cdc.gov/SIDS/SUID.htm>).

Structurally the book is divided into 13 chapters indexed into numerical subchapters and occasionally sub-subchapters and goes into great detail into the mechanics and reasons for each necessary step in the investigation. Initially and importantly, the author acknowledges the greatest barrier in initiating the infant death investigation—the difficulty in interviewing and asking difficult questions of the grieving parents immediately following the death when they are reeling from the reality of the death. This process almost always evokes a tremendous outpouring of sorrow from the caregiver or parents and can make the unprepared investigator uncomfortable. In the first chapter, the author discusses these barriers and ways to overcome them, including a lack of knowledge, time delays, inexperience with grieving parents/caregivers, denial, bias, lack of communication, or a lack of guidelines and policies for infant deaths. The second to fourth chapters discuss maternal and infant health, followed by beginning the investigation, and obtaining observations of first responders, which are all important. The author advocates an immediate and two pronged approach upon notification of the infant death with one investigator going to examine the infant, and the second investigator going to the place where the infant was found or became unresponsive, to interview the caregiver or parents. The author describes the process in detail and acknowledges that this is the ideal, and that some argue this is not practical in every death investigation system. The next chapter is more controversial and raises some concern, entitled Initial Postmortem External Assessment, as it cites a now-rescinded American

Academy of Pediatrics 2001 recommendation, after concerns raised by the National Association of Medical Examiners. This recommendation is the basis for a thorough and detailed investigation of the infant by the death investigator at the hospital or scene of death. Almost all forensic pathologists recommend against the practice of the prepostmortem examination, which invariably creates conflicts between the reports of the forensic pathologist and investigator that may cause difficulty if legal proceedings arise from the death. Chapter 6 is excellent and takes the reader through the process of a thorough death scene investigation. Chapters 7 and 8 are well done and thoroughly describe the interview process and the essential process of the doll re-enactment. Performing and photographically documenting the doll re-enactment, although emotionally difficult for both in the investigator and the caregiver who found the unresponsive infant, is probably the most valuable tool in separating the accidental asphyxia death from the "classic" SIDS death. The next chapter gives the investigator some insight into the postmortem examination performed by the forensic pathologist. Chapter 10 deals with obtaining and reviewing the medical records of the mother and infant. Chapter 11 discusses preparing for and involvement in the Child Death Review Process, with which the author is very familiar. Next, supporting the family in their grief and referring them to social service organizations for assistance is reviewed. Finally, the author makes the case for the investigator obtaining professional certification from the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators, and possibly establishing a sub-certification in infant death investigation in the future.

In summary, the book is a very thorough and detailed description of the ideal, but clearly obtainable, process for investigating and documenting the circumstances of an infant's sudden and unexpected death as soon as notification of the death is made to the coroner or medical examiner. This book is recommended as either a stand-alone reference or companion to the excellent SUIDI Training Academies in the United States, and is very similar in its approach. Whether one's death investigation system can follow this author's idealized approach, or adapting the author's procedure to your own office's policy and procedure for an infant death, the ultimate goal is the correct determination of the cause of the infant's death. From these uniform determinations preventative measures such as the Back to Sleep campaign or the infant needing its own separate sleeping space initiatives can arise, hopefully reducing these tragic deaths.

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