

## BOOK REVIEW

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### Review of: *Death Scene Investigation: A Field Guide*

**REFERENCE:** Wagner SA. *Death scene investigation: a field guide*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2009, 240pp.

Death investigation is a critical subspecialty in the forensic sciences, and continues to gain in popularity and prestige. Television has shown us a glamorized version of its inner workings and the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigation offers real-world certification in this important field of study and practice. Numerous excellent publications deal with this broad subject, and this one adds to that body and updates prior works. The preface by the author begins by stating that “death investigation is an art that is never mastered,” which is certainly true. Of course, there are different levels of proficiency that the perpetual student works through, attaining knowledge, experience, and finally a level of mastery. This handbook, or field guide, succeeds in clearly sharing the author’s important knowledge and experiences as a forensic pathologist performing death investigations.

The book appropriately acknowledges the influence of the late Dr. Jay Dix’s prior work *Handbook for Death Scene Investigators* as an impetus for writing this field guide. Dr. Wagner’s guide is divided into 12 chapters, starting with guidelines for the death scene investigator, discussing why it is important, its philosophy, and how to begin the process, properly emphasizing that the body is the most important piece of evidence. Chapters 2 and 3, The Body at the Scene and Assessment of the Body at the Scene, offer valuable pearls about body transportation, confirming death, evidence, photography, and the advice of “be suspicious but objective.” The author appropriately offers a list on examining the body at the scene by an experienced investigator. Postmortem changes are explained very well and in detail with appropriate color photographs. The subject of time of death is discussed not only in context of the body, but also in the clues in the deceased’s surrounding environment. Chapter 4, Detailed Physical Assessment of the Body at the Scene, describes some of the outward clues of disease or trauma for the investigator using medical terminology. Often

examining the body at the scene in any great detail is a delicate balance between the death scene investigator’s need for immediate information and the forensic pathologist’s need to examine an undisturbed body. In Indiana, the local coroners or deputy coroners perform most death scene investigations, and the forensic pathologist performs the autopsy the next morning in a regional office. Most coroners will not undress or unduly disturb the body, which is recommended by almost all forensic pathologists. This interaction between the two requires communication and develops with experience. Chapter 5 outlines how to obtain the critical medical history of the deceased.

Chapters 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11 are the largest portion of the book and describe the autopsy findings in natural diseases causing sudden death, a concise review of lethal traumatic injuries, the signs of cardiopulmonary resuscitation, findings from previous surgeries, and a written and pictorial demonstration of the performance of the medicolegal autopsy. These chapters give the death scene investigator an appropriate overview of the autopsy process, how the forensic pathologist works, and the majority of the findings found at the forensic autopsy. Chapter 8 describes the various means used to identify the deceased, answering the first critical question of Adelson: “who are you?” Chapter 12 quickly describes the other disciplines in the forensic sciences, with forensic geologist a new one for this reviewer. The bibliography and index are thorough. Appendices A and B are helpful descriptions of common prescription drugs and their classes, and common medical terminology found in the autopsy report or emergency department records. The color photographs are a nice addition and emphasize the points in the text. The handbook is small enough to be put in the scene investigator’s field bag or within handy reach on the desk for quick reference. Overall, this is a helpful and valuable concise handbook best suited and recommended for the novice and the intermediate level death scene investigator, but is also a valuable review for those with a greater mastery of the subject.

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