

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Water-Related Death Investigation*

REFERENCE: Armstrong EJ, Erskine KL. Water-related death investigation: practical methods and forensic applications. Boca Raton, FL and New York: CRC Press, Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, 2011, 344 pp.

The most obvious question one has when presented with the title of this book is “How much can you possibly say about drowning?” In fact, there is quite a bit concerning drowning and other water-related deaths, and the authors do a nice job of consolidating that information into one text. While there is excessive filler material that would be better suited to a basic forensic pathology textbook, the chapters specifically concerning water-related death investigation are informative and supported by excellent diagrams and photographs.

The book is divided into 11 chapters (plus appendices). Four of these chapters (“Introduction,” “Investigative Duties on Scene,” “The Forensic Pathological Aspects of Deaths Due to Drowning and Bodies Recovered from Fluid Environments,” and “Water-Related Deaths by Manner”) focus on the intended topic of the book: water-related deaths.

The first chapter concisely discusses the pathophysiology of drowning and then broadens the scope to discuss other water-related deaths such as hypothermia and water-borne illness. This chapter briefly includes more controversial concepts such as diatom analysis and dry drowning, but these are never fleshed out in subsequent chapters. There should have been a more comprehensive discussion reflecting multiple viewpoints and a review of the literature. For example, “drowning tests” could have been a separate chapter, even if the authors choose not to take a firm stance for or against the usefulness of some of these tests.

The second chapter, “Investigative Duties on Scene,” is the greatest strength of the book and comprises over 80 pages of the 344-page text. Topics covered include underwater search techniques, marking body locations, useful equipment such as hand-held sonar, and evidence recovery. There are numerous case

examples, clear diagrams, and excellent scene photographs. It should be noted that the photographs are black-and-white, but there is also a color insert with over 20 pages of color reproductions of select photographs.

The other seven chapters, while for the most part well written, could have been placed in any other introductory forensic textbook. “On-Scene Body Assessment” is the classic introductory chapter on postmortem change. Chapter five discusses pretrial preparation and is an excellent overview, but it would have been better suited for a basic broad-scoped forensic text. Chapters on the autopsy (particularly “Medicolegal Investigation of Deaths: Initial Processing,” “The Medicolegal Autopsy,” “Asphyxia,” and “Forensic Toxicological Aspects of Death Due to Drowning and Bodies Recovered from Fluid Environments”) are for the most part informative and well written, but have little to do specifically with water-related death investigation. These sections include descriptions of *all* asphyxial deaths, blunt force trauma, sharp force trauma, gunshot wounds, and even child abuse.

A chapter devoted to witness interviewing and interrogation includes “determining accuracy of statements obtained at the scene” and eventually covers verbal indicators of deception and even nonverbal communication. A 2-page composite of “truthful” and “deceptive” postures and expressions borders on ridiculous. This information feels completely out of place given the topic of the book, and the usefulness of much of this information is questionable at best.

In summary, *Water-Related Death Investigation* could have been 150 pages shorter and still achieve its goal. In fact, this is the perfect example of a text that would serve best in e-book format, should the publishers wish to move in that direction. Some of the sections are very strong and are recommended reading for both forensic pathologists and death investigators. Other sections provide a well-written overview of forensic pathology, but would be of more use to nonphysician forensic professionals.

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