

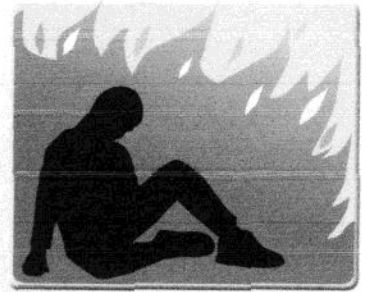
Cause of death

The circumstances in which a body is found may clearly indicate how the victim died. But what happens if the superficial evidence is inconclusive? In these cases, an autopsy may help the coroner to decide the cause of the fatality, and to discover whether a seemingly innocent death was in fact a disguised homicide.

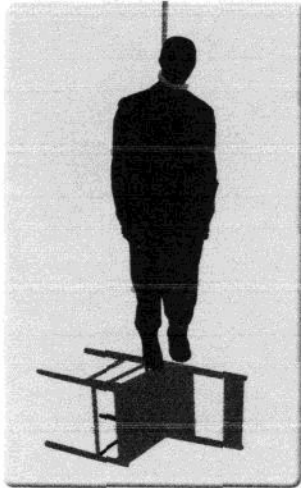
Deciding the manner of death—suicide, natural, accidental, or homicide—is not the pathologist’s responsibility. However, in seeking the cause of death—such as a gunshot wound to the head—pathologists

uncover evidence that points to the manner. The three examples on this page show how a pathologist is a detective of sorts. He uses a process of deduction to discover the facts surrounding a death.

BODY FOUND AT SCENE OF FIRE



Is there soot in the air passages?



BODY FOUND HANGING

Victim found hanging with signs of death by hypoxia (lack of oxygen). These include blue complexion, pinpoint burst blood vessels, and distended lungs.

Do rope marks on the neck have the inflamed edge of a "vital reaction"?

YES



Victim was alive before hanging. Do marks on the neck match the rope?

YES

NO

Victim was dead before hanging. This is strongly suggestive of homicide.



BODY FOUND IN WATER

Is there water in the air passages and stomach, and are the lungs swollen?

YES

Victim died by wet drowning. Pathologist looks for signs that the victim struggled to breathe, such as bleeding in the lungs. This and other evidence, such as leaves or twigs held in a viselike grip as victim tried to clutch at something, suggests drowning was an accident.



NO

Did a spasm in the larynx stop the heart?

