Abstract

"Cyanide is used as a suicidal agent but also as a homicidal agent, particularly among healthcare and laboratory workers, and it can potentially be used in a terrorist attack. It is also still used in cases of illegal euthanasia" (Musshoff, Kirschbaum, & Madea, 2011, p. 1). Although cyanide poisoning deaths are rare in the United States today, there are still people who have ready access to the poison through their occupations. These occupations include chemists, jewelers, those involved in pest control, mineral refining, photography, electroplating, dyeing, printing, and salmon poaching (Gill, Marker, & Stajic, 2004). The purpose of this research is to inform funeral professionals, or anyone interested, what cyanide poisoning is, how death from it occurs, how to detect it in postmortem remains, how it poses a problem for embalmers, and what embalming techniques can be used to treat it. Being able to determine postmortem identifying factors of cyanide poisoning without autopsy confirmation can be beneficial toward treating it correctly. First, cyanide will be defined along with forms it can be found in. Second will be a biological description of how cyanide kills. Third, how to identify a cyanide death from postmortem remains. Fourth, how death from cyanide poisoning poses a problem for embalmers will be expressed. Finally, a recommended way to treat cyanide poisoned remains will be shared by use of a case study. Past historical events in which cyanide had been used (the Holocaust, Jonestown Massacre, and Chicago Tylenol Murders) will be shared along with how someone can get exposed to cyanide poisoning in their everyday life. How to identify a cyanide death will be elucidated. Problems cyanide poisoning causes for embalmers, such as skin discolorations will be shared and chemical solutions and embalming techniques that can be used to treat a cyanide death through embalming will be suggested and explained. Although most cyanide deaths often

get autopsied due to these deaths usually being homicide or drug overdose cases, not every case does (Mayer & Reed, 2012). Being educated on how to determine postmortem identifying factors of cyanide poisoning, without autopsy confirmation, will help embalmers consider cyanide poisoning as being a possible cause of death when they see certain postmortem discolorations or smell a certain “bitter almond” scent that is associated with cyanide (Gill et al., 2004). With this knowledge, embalmers can then treat the decedent to look how the deceased's family remembered them and even protect the embalmer themselves from getting exposed to cyanide.

Keywords: embalming, cyanide, chemicals

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