

## A triple murder

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### Abstract

Three partially burnt bodies were found in a burnt out bedroom. A candle and matches were found on a partially burnt bed, suggesting accidental deaths. Careful scene analysis and forensic post-mortems demonstrated that this was a multiple murder rather than an accident.

### Keywords

Triple murder, burnt bodies, crime scene

### Introduction

Fire deaths are a common medico-legal finding in all parts of the world. Southeast Asia alone accounts for just over half the total number of fire-related deaths worldwide, and females in this region have the highest fire-related burn mortality rates globally.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 90% occur in the home and are caused by smoking, defective electrical wiring, defective or misused heaters, children playing with matches, or clothing catching on fire.<sup>2</sup> Most fire deaths are accidental, and less than 10% are the result of purposefully set incidents.<sup>3</sup> The present case concerns multiple deaths initially believed to have been due to an accidental fire. However, subsequent investigations revealed that the deaths were the result of murder and the fire scene was created to conceal the crime in the hope of misleading investigators. This case reiterates the importance of scene examination and teamwork with meticulous autopsy in the investigation of fire deaths.

### Case report

The partially burnt bodies of a middle-aged woman and her two sons aged 2 years and 11 months were found on their beds inside a bedroom, located on the upper floor of a two-storey house. The deceased's husband and her family members suggested that a possible source of the fire was a candle found on the bed. There was no history of suicidal attempts, expression of suicidal ideas, or significant reason for suicide. It was learned that the husband, mother-in-law, and two domestic helpers

were sleeping in adjacent rooms in the same house, at the time of this incident.

The room contained two beds with mattresses, a fan, and an air conditioner. There were two windows and one door. The bodies of the mother and the younger child were found facing each other at the centre between two beds. The elder child's body was found at the corner of the other bed. A partially burnt candle with two burnt matches were found covered with a saucer next to the body but that particular portion of the mattress was hardly burnt. Instead, maximum burn damage was found at three other points; two areas of the mattresses on either side of a woman's body and near the air conditioner.

No suicidal notes were found. Doors were neither locked from the inside nor blocked from outside.

Samples from the three burnt areas and beneath the dead bodies were collected by the fire expert and sent for analysis for accelerants. Some partially burnt clothing had a smell of perfume, from a scent bottle, which was recovered from outside the room and was forwarded for forensic investigations (Figure 1). The possibility of an electrical fault, which is a common cause of domestic fire incidents, was also considered and later excluded by inspection by electrical experts.

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The objectives of scene examination in fire deaths include<sup>5</sup> identification of the deceased, injuries sustained, whether the victim was alive at the time of the fire and reasons why the victim did not escape, and whether there was any incapacity that prevented escape. It also includes the cause of death, manner of death, the cause of the fire, the victim's reason for being present at the scene of the fire, and whether they could have caused the fire. Teamwork is necessary to achieve the objectives of the investigation. The fire expert, law enforcement officials, electrical expert, and a forensic expert are essential for such a scene visit to investigate and reconstruct the incident.<sup>6</sup> Although the autopsy may yield some answers, identification of relevant issues and collection of evidence must begin at the scene.

Were there factors that rendered the deceased unable to escape the conflagration? The scene examination with the body in situ becomes important in understanding the final moments of the deceased.<sup>6</sup> In this case, all three bodies were found on the beds, in usual sleeping positions, without any apparent attempts to escape. When a fire does start children tend to panic and hide in closets, under the bed or in bathrooms.<sup>7</sup> The possible movements of the victims were not restricted as the door and windows were neither locked from the inside nor blocked from outside. Hence, the present circumstances indicated that the victims were either dead or incapacitated when the fires started.

On the other hand, a burnt candle with a few burnt matches on the bed was not associated with significant local burning of the mattress, which makes it unlikely to be the starting point of the fire. Many investigators believe that cigarette smoking is one of the commonest causes of domestic fire incidents,<sup>8</sup> which was excluded in this case. Fire deaths are some of the most challenging fatalities, both from the investigative and the autopsy perspective. One reason is the multi-discipline team approach and the inevitable contamination of the scene.<sup>9</sup>

One of the key issues of investigation of fire death is to determine whether the victim was alive during the fire. The autopsy of the younger child showed soot in the trachea and stomach indicating that he was

breathing at the time of the burn incident,<sup>10</sup> theoretically he had a chance to escape if he had not been an infant. Autopsy of mother and elder son did not reveal any medical condition that could have prevented them from moving from the scene. The absence of soot in the respiratory and upper gastrointestinal tracts indicated that the mother and the elder child were dead at the time of onset of the fire.

## Conclusions

Examination of entire scene, team work among relevant experts, and investigation of the social background of suspects are important aspects of the criminal investigation process.

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