

The natural death in detention: A case series and review of the literature

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Introduction: Death in detention has been reported to have increased significantly in South Africa in recent years and remains a contentious issue, attracting attention from media and human rights organisations alike. Various contributory factors and pertinent issues have been reported, including overcrowding, suboptimal access of inmates to healthcare, decreased releases on parole for health-related issues, and an increase in the rate of HIV infection amongst inmates.

Methods: This is a retrospective review spanning a period of less than twelve months, from October 2015 to September 2016, during which three deaths in detention were seen at Roodepoort Forensic Pathology Services Mortuary. The scene of death was attended to by the pathologist in only two out of the three cases. Blood samples for alcohol concentration analysis, tissue samples for histology and body fluid samples for toxicology were taken at autopsy in all the cases.

Results: Each of the three cases have been assessed as being due to natural causes, ranging from meningoencephalitis

to ischaemic heart disease to pneumonia, respectively. Although blood alcohol concentration and toxicology results are forthcoming, the macroscopic and histological findings are of prior significance.

Conclusion: A range of issues have surfaced from the analysis of each of the three cases, including lack of communication regarding protocols for scene investigation, delayed access to medical records of the deceased, allegations of negligence against correctional services staff, and overcrowding. Further investigation and ongoing studies in this regard are warranted.

Speaker Biography

Shirley Jena Stuart is currently working as a specialist in department of Forensic Pathology and Medicine at Witwatersrand Medical School and a specialist Forensic Pathologist at Gauteng Health Department. She also served as a medical officer in Anatomical Pathology at Lancet Laboratories. Also she worked as a Doctor, Community Service Medical Officer at Zithulele Hospital and Mthatha General Hospital.

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