

MY LAST SEVERAL COLUMNS HAVE FOCUSED IN DETAIL, ON HOW TO DOCUMENT A DEATH SCENE USING A CHECKLIST. THIS WRITTEN TESTAMENT OF THE SCENE: WHAT YOU OBSERVED, WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE, AND WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE INITIAL INVESTIGATION, CAN IMPACT THE SUCCESSFUL PROSECUTION OF THE CASE.

A checklist is important because it not only gives you a mechanism for your report of the scene, but also serves as a way to ensure that you are thorough in your observations. You are documenting not only what you see but also what you don't see; both of which are important when you get to court.

Think of everything you write in your checklist as a potential piece of a puzzle. Your job at the crime scene is to find as many pieces as you can; beginning to form a picture of what happened – what the puzzle looks like. You will, undoubtedly, find evidence that is not a part of the puzzle. You may not know what fits and what doesn't, so document it all. It may be too late later on. In this column, I will discuss the documentation of wounds, weapons, drugs, and medications as well as identifying the deceased and the notification of the family; documenting trace evidence; processing the scene; and wrapping up the scene.

While observing the body, note whether there are any apparent wounds. Note the type of wound: gunshot, stab, blunt force, beating, or defensive wounds. Are there wounds that you can't determine? Describe the wounds as they appear to you. In general, I don't measure wounds. This is something best done by the medical examiner and his or her team. Are there any marks, tattoos, or scars on the body? Describe them. Do any of the wounds or marks appear to be defensive? Your description of wounds, marks, and tattoos should include their precise locations on the body. All of these markings should be photographed, as well. You can use a body diagram sheet to note the location of these. Note that this is a visual inspection. Do not remove clothing to examine the body.

Next you want to check for any weapons. Note the type of weapon (or possible weapon) and anything that identifies it, including model number, brand, serial number, length of knife blade, and so on. Look for shell casings and spent rounds and document what you found and where you found it. Check for blood on the weapon. Use photographs as a second way to document what you see. Look around the scene and collect anything you can, being careful to maintain the integrity of the evidence. Today, more and more evidence is useful and can be analyzed and compared.

The presence of any illegal or legal drugs may play a role in what occurred. Use your checklist to describe any drugs found at the scene as well as their location and any identifying information such as a prescription number, pharmacy, and date. The mixture of more than one medication (legal or not) can cause behavior changes that help explain what happened or can even be fatal. Is there any evidence of illegal drugs? The death could be the result of a drug deal gone wrong. Look for drug paraphernalia. Describe it and photograph it.

Look for signs of sexual deviate practice or sexual battery. Are there any sex toys present? DNA evidence can be particularly useful in sexually based crimes. Remember that your initial investigation may be the only opportunity you have to collect certain evidence so be as thorough as possible. Look at the whole picture – even though you may not be sure what's related to that puzzle you're trying to work out – and gather what you can, before it is lost forever.

Turn your attention to identifying the deceased. Work toward a positive id. This can be as easy as a visual inspection but can also involve more rigorous, time consuming methods such as dental records, DNA analysis, fingerprints, skull reconstruction, and artistic reconstruction. Note how the identification was accomplished then gather all the information you can about the victim, including name, date of birth, social security number, address, and next of kin. Write in your checklist, who was notified about the death and how to contact them. Record the name of the person who made the notification and when.

Concentrate next on processing the scene, using your checklist to maintain a trail of what was collected and processed. Was evidence collected? Was it photographed? Was an evidence recovery log used? Was a physical evidence recovery receipt made? Describe what items were processed at the scene and by what method. Record the date and time processing began and ended. Were any items processed for latent prints? Jot down a description of the item, its location, the method used to process the prints, and the results. Remember that these prints may or may not be of value. That can't be determined until examined by the appropriate equipment. Look for any type of trace evidence: blood, hair, fibers, stains, glass fragments, soil or dirt, toolmarks, liquid, or anything else. Describe what you found and where. Remember, even the smallest piece of evidence can represent a valuable piece of the puzzle. The comparison of soil or glass fragments found at the scene to those embedded in a shoe or a sample of an unusual stain can lead to a breakthrough. Leave no stone unturned and document everything.

Look for the presence of shoe or tire tracks. These can be easily lost simply by the crime scene team's presence, so take special care. Record if any tracks were found and their locations. Use diagrams and photographs. Use your checklist to note whether or not castings or electrostatic lifts (for dust prints or prints in the dust) were made.

Document the processing of any vehicles found at the scene. Record any identifying information and photograph. The vehicle(s) may be moved for further processing. Vehicles can potentially hold lots of evidence whose relevance may not be known until completely processed.

Once the scene is processed, it can be released. Before release, do a final walk through with a fresh look. You might see something you missed. You might find a tool of your own you left behind! Next, get together with the detectives and district

or county attorneys who may be present or worked on the case. As a team, review what has been covered during the death scene investigation. When you are all satisfied, formally release the scene. Record in your checklist, the name of the person authorized to release the crime scene and the date and time. Note the detective in charge and the D.A. or county attorney and whether or not the scene was secured and by what method. Document the date and time of release as well as the name, address, and phone of the person the scene was released to.

Anything not covered by your checklist should be written in a narrative report. Chances are you've covered most everything if you've been documenting as you go. I can't stress enough the importance of maintaining a checklist when investigating a death scene. It reminds you to look at everything, even when you are distracted. It becomes a guide when piecing the puzzle together. It helps to eliminate the questions.

The ideas presented here are meant to be general in nature. Keep in mind that key to any successful crime scene investigation is close attention to the statutes of the jurisdiction in which you are working. Following such laws and guidelines regarding the collection of evidence may mean the difference between a successful prosecution and the guilty going free. Work closely with you local prosecutor and coroners.

My first three columns on using a death scene checklist can be found at www.forensicmag.com. More information on my death scene investigation checklist can be found at www.csigizmos.com.