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The Royal College of Pathologists
Pathology: the science behind the cure

Pathology Delivery Board Royal College of Pathologists

Guidance

The Use of Time of Death Estimates Based on Heat Loss from the Body

Issue 1 March 2025



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Purpose

This document provides guidance on the use of results from methods to estimate the time of death (ToD) on the basis of heat loss from the body.

Scope

There are a number of methods of ToD estimation based on different post mortem changes to the body. This guidance applies only to those based on heat loss from the body.

Development

Initial Consideration

Dr Richard Shepherd (then a Home Office registered forensic pathologist) identified an error in the content of a respected textbook in relation to the estimation of the ToD and raised this issue with the profession. That led to the matter being raised with the Forensic Science Regulator (the Regulator).

The Regulator sought the views of the Forensic Pathology Specialist Group (FPSG).

The FPSG considered not only the issues raised by the error but also the general robustness of this type of ToD estimation. This led to the production of an interim report which was provided to the Regulator.

Consultation

The interim report was circulated, seeking comment, to the following groups of forensic pathologists.

- a. Those, in England and Wales, on the Home Office Register of Forensic Pathologists.
- b. Those, in Scotland, who acted for the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service.
- c. Those in the State Pathologist's Department in Northern Ireland.

The responses to the request were supportive of the approach proposed in relation to ToD estimation. There was some comment on the wider issue of ToD estimation that are not relevant to this document.

Publication

The above process led to the publication of guidance by the Regulator and the Royal College of Pathologists [1].

The Regulator has withdrawn from the area of forensic pathology. The published guidance was withdrawn by the Regulator. The purpose of this document is to republish the guidance.

Implementation

This document became effective on 1 March 2025

Guidance

Background

A considerable amount of valuable research has been performed on the subject of ToD estimation and on methods based on heat loss from the body in particular. Nothing in this guidance should be interpreted as a criticism of that research or those who performed it.

As is to be expected in any research projects of this type this work was carried out in carefully controlled conditions and factors which might influence the heat loss were either controlled or carefully monitored. Further, the number of bodies involved in the studies was limited (no doubt as a result of the practical issue of supply) when compared to the potential variability of the human body.

The result of the various pieces of research is a number of models which allow the pathologist to provide an estimate of the time period in which the death was likely to have occurred.

It is important to note that the models recognise that the ToD estimate can, in a proportion of cases, be inaccurate.

Application to Cases

The application of these models to real cases is difficult for a number of reasons. There are two basic areas that cause complication.

- a. The models were derived from specific sets of data and their application to any other death is, necessarily, less robust.
- b. The real death will not have occurred in a controlled or monitored environment.

In relation to the second of these points a number of issues arise. While none of these issues prevent the use of the models from being employed, they do highlight the results may be influenced by factors that cannot be completely addressed in the model. The issues include the following.

- a. A number of factors which are relevant to the application of the model will not be known.
 - i. The temperature of the body at the point of death will not be known.

- ii. The temperature of the environment at or since death will not be known.
- iii. The level of air flow over the body will not be known.
- b. A number of factors will be difficult to build into the model in a case specific manner. These include the following.
 - i. The impact of clothing on the cooling rate.
 - ii. The impact of the environment on cooling (e.g. insulation effects provided by lying on carpets or furniture).
 - iii. Potential external heat sources.
 - iv. The nature of the body in the case.
 - v. The potential impact of injuries/wounds to the body (e.g. large abdominal lacerations).

These issues must be combined with the inevitable issues of uncertainty in any measurements made (e.g. temperature or mass) and in the use of the model.

In some cases the issue may be further complicated by there being different cooling periods or even heating/cooling periods as a result of changes in the environment.

The above leads to a number of conclusions.

- a. In any case the pathologist cannot know, and cannot (by the use of this method) determine, the accuracy of the ToD estimate which has been made.
- b. Some of the models allow a prediction with a 95% confidence limit. This does not mean there is a 95% probability the death occurred within the period provided by the model.

Use of Results

Investigations

A ToD estimate may be of great value to the investigator in focusing attention on a particular period or prioritising lines of enquiry. However, the limitations of the estimate must be clear to the investigator.

When providing a ToD estimate to the investigator the pathologist should take the following steps.

- a. The pathologist must make clear the estimate is only an estimate and the accuracy cannot be determined.

- b. The pathologist must explain that the death could have occurred outside the estimated period and, perhaps, a significant period outside it.
- c. Advise that the estimate should not be used to:
 - i. Define the period in which death occurred;
 - ii. Assign probabilities to likely periods of death; or
 - iii. Include or exclude a suspect from the investigation.

Evidence

When providing any report or statement the pathologist should make clear the limitations of any ToD estimate provided. In essence the points listed in paragraphs above should be covered in the statement/report.

Acknowledgement

The College and the Regulator would like to acknowledge the assistance of the following in the production of this guidance.

- a. The Speciality Advisory Committee on Forensic Pathology of the Royal College of Pathologists.
- b. The Forensic Science Regulator's Forensic Pathology Specialist Group (now defunct).
- c. The Standards Group of the Pathology Delivery Board.

Review

This document is subject to review at regular intervals.

If you have any comments please send them to the address or e-mail set out on the Internet at URL: www.gov.uk/guidance/forensic-pathology-role-within-the-home-office.

References

- [1] Forensic Science Regulator, "The Use of Time of Death Estimates Based on Heat Loss from the Body, The Royal College of Pathologists and the Forensic Science Regulator [FSR-G-211]," [Online]. Available: www.gov.uk/government/publications/time-of-death-estimations.

Version Control

Version: Issue 1

Last amended: 1 March 2025

Approved by: Pathology Delivery Board and Royal College of Pathologists

Approved on: 1 March 2025

Effective from: 1 March 2025

Next review: two-year intervals

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Version History

Version Number	Date Approved	Approved By	Brief Description
1	01/03/2025	Jeff Adams	First version

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