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Accident or "extended suicide with a pet" - a case study

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ABSTRACT

Work on cases involving more than one dead body requires close interdisciplinary co-operation between investigating bodies and forensic scientists. Here a case is presented which necessitated medico-legal examination as well as the help of a veterinary pathologist; furthermore, analytical approaches and working methods were used. A 40-year-old woman and her Irish Setter bitch were found dead in an artificial pond used for irrigation purposes. In order to differentiate between killing by a second party, suicide or accident, synoptic methods were applied which led to the conclusion that the death of the woman and her dog should be classed as accidental.

Keywords: Accident; Suicide; Extended suicide; Pet; Domestic Animals; Veterinary pathology; Behavioural analysis in crimes

Introduction

For conclusions regarding the manner of and circumstances leading to death in cases involving more than one body, criminological precision work and co-operation of different disciplines are essential. In many cases, the reconstruction of the circumstances leading to death is only possible after exhausting various diagnostic aids and establishing the details pertaining to the person's background[1,2,3,4]. In cases involving more than one dead body, the following systematic differentiation is possible:

accidental: e.g. CO-poisoning[5], unintentional overdose in the case of drug addicts, particularly following the consumption of so-called drug cocktails[6] suicide: extended suicide[7,8,9], collective suicide[10,11,12], as a spontaneous reaction to the death of another person[13] multiple homicides including disposal of bodies[14]

Box 1 Extended suicide is the phenomenon of murder of a family member(s) by a suicidal person when murder is viewed as a way to protect the family member(s) from a life of suffering.

If the corpse of a human and that of his/her pet are found together, the alternative conclusions are reduced to accidental death, killing involving a third person or extended suicide. However, it is debatable whether the latter is applicable in such a case.

In this particular case, a woman reported missing was found together with her dog in a pond. After medico-legal and veterinary pathological examinations as well as the use of standard criminological methods, no conclusive answer was reached regarding the circumstances surrounding their deaths. For this reason attempts were made to obtain a classification using partial aspects of behavioural analysis in crimes[15,16].

The victims

The body was that of a woman of about 40 years of age who had lived the past 10 years in a quiet little town together with her family, i.e. husband, 2 children and a dog (a 2-year-old Irish Setter bitch). Their circumstances could be described as secure and relatively well-off. For their 15-year-old daughter the family was able to afford a horse which was kept at a nearby stable.

The woman had been born in a German-speaking foreign country in which her mother still resides. According to her husband, the woman's parents had been divorced, and she had been inclined to suicide when she was younger. She is said to have had some qualifications as a social worker, but had never worked in this field. She merely helped out at a shop which sold organic food. Over the years she had moved house several times to different locations within Germany.

The husband worked in a senior position in education and describes himself and his wife as religious people. They had helped to form a church community from a group which met to study the Bible. During this time, his wife lived only for her family and the parish. A few years ago they had both become less involved in active work in the parish. Their married life could have been classed as "normal" apart from one serious crisis.

Recently, there had been an argument because the husband had desired a change in occupation and geographical location, but his wife had refused to move house again. Furthermore, they had planned to visit her mother soon, and such an undertaking had always been associated with stress. Also, the wife had suffered very much from the fact that a close friend had recently been referred to a psychiatric hospital. On the evening before she disappeared she and her husband had been discussing the possibility of her changing jobs, and she had even considered further training to such an end.

According to her husband, his wife was highly strung. She identified intensely with the problems of others and struggled with them as if they were her own. Over the last few days she was slightly emotionally unstable, her husband stated, but she had not said anything about any intention to commit suicide.

She always gave a "positive impression" according to her GP who had known the woman for 4 years. She had not been on any medication. There had been nothing to suggest depression or any other psychiatric disorder. For the past two months she had visited her GP twice a week for the treatment of a chronic skin condition.

Her days followed a certain routine which involved her getting up early, preparing everything for herself and her family and then cycling to the stable together with her dog. There she would go for an hour's walk with the dog. Later she would feed her daughter's horse. Usually she returned home at around 11 am.

The dog was a 2-year-old Irish Setter bitch. The Irish Setter is considered to be a very good pointer with a lively and ebullient character, is friendly towards other animals and enjoys hunting. This breed is valued for its speed, its excellent sense of smell and high resilience against all types of terrain and weather. Irish Setters excel at hunting waterfowl, moorhens or pheasants. They are also characterised by longevity with a lifespan of anything up to 20 years[17].

The last hours

On a Wednesday morning in March the woman behaved "normally, as usual", according to her daughter, neither "sad" nor "wound up". First she put on a coat over her pyjamas to hang out the washing on the balcony. Then she laid out on the bed her clothes for the day, just as she did every morning. She advised her daughter who had a slight cold, not to take the cough medicine containing paracodamol because this medication would be too strong for "a bit of a cough".

At 7.15 am husband and both children said goodbye to her. The woman said she was thinking of leaving the house at 8.30 am as usual.

Judging from the items recovered, she chose to wear on that morning a black down jacket, a cardigan, hiking boots and socks. She also packed a dog whistle, a bag of dog food, a yellow ball and an aerosol spray containing pepper.

According to the tenant of the riding stables, who lives on the land in a caravan, she left her bike in the usual place and wandered across the fields with her dog around 8.30 am.

The time till the corpses were recovered

When the husband returned home in the early afternoon of Wednesday, he was unable to find his wife. Her bicycle and the dog were also missing. He phoned friends, relatives and the emergency services, but all in vain. Then he set off to find his wife. At the stables he found her bicycle where it had been parked on the bike rack. At 15.59 he phoned the police to report that his wife was missing.

A search involving police and fire service was organised immediately and was conducted around the stables, but had to be abandoned later that evening. The search was resumed the following day.

In the vicinity of the stables is a large orchard surrounded by a fence. On Thursday afternoon at about 13.30 the owner of this property opened a gate, the only entrance to the area, which had been locked with a padlock and chain. Whilst working in the orchard, he noticed some clothes at the edge of the pond. On closer inspection, he discovered a corpse in the water and ran to the tenant of the stables who then informed the police at 14.00 hours. According to the owner of the orchard, both padlock and chain had been undamaged. The day before he had been on his land until about 9.30 am, but had not noticed anything untoward. Search party helpers mentioned that they had searched the property the night before at approximately 22.37, but they had not noticed any abandoned clothing.

The place of discovery

Aspects of location

A tarmacked road branches off a few metres from the exit of the A road leading to the centre of the town where the woman lived. This road curves to the left after about 30 metres and ends approximately 120 metres further at the stables on the right hand side. From there, the path continues to the edge of the forest and meets another path running parallel to the edge of the woods. The abovementioned orchard stretches over the entire length of the path up to the edge of the woods. The gate of the property faces the edge of the woods.

The 1.50m high netting fence faces the stables and has been partly pushed down about 15m left of the gate. A person of 175cm stature would have been able to climb over the fence without any difficulty after pushing the wire down further. This "weak point" of the fence had been used by the search parties the previous evening. Apart from there, the fencing bore no other traces of damage. About 100 fruit trees of medium height were growing in the orchard. Beyond the gate and into the orchard there is a beaten track leading to the middle of the property which ends on the left next to the two consecutively placed artificially created ponds, which serve as a reservoir for watering the trees. Both ponds are about 8m in diameter and 4.50m deep, conical with steep walls (20-30°). They are lined with green plastic pond film, and at the time the bodies were found, they were filled so there was 1.60m difference between the surface of the water and the edge of the ponds. Therefore, the water was 2.90m deep. In both ponds there was a plastic hose about 30 cm in diameter, connected to a pump.

At the edge of the rear pond close to the path were found a pair of shoes, a pair of socks, a black jacket and a brown cardigan. On the surface of the rear pond, one could see the back of the head, neck and the upper part of the torso of a human body. Beneath the surface of the same pond the brown fur of a dog was also visible.

The corpses of the woman and the dog were recovered at about 14.40. Until then, the person who had discovered the body, the police and fire service search parties and CID were present. The body was examined by a doctor of the emergency services. Then a forensic pathologist was called and he arrived at 15.45.

Report on the findings after examination of the body in situ

The corpse of a middle-aged woman was dressed in a long-sleeved shirt, bra and knickers. The clothes were undamaged. Complete rigor mortis had set in. Post-mortem lividity was found on the upper body and easily disappeared on application of pressure. Less pronounced livores were visible on the back of the body and these faded in response to less pressure than was needed on the marks on the front of the body. At 15.50 a temperature of 8.4°C was measured rectally, whilst the atmospheric temperature was 12.6°C and the temperature at the surface of the water was 9.6°C.



Figure 1. Body of the woman after recovery: striated reddening of the skin and hematoma marks, particularly on the anterior aspects of the thighs.

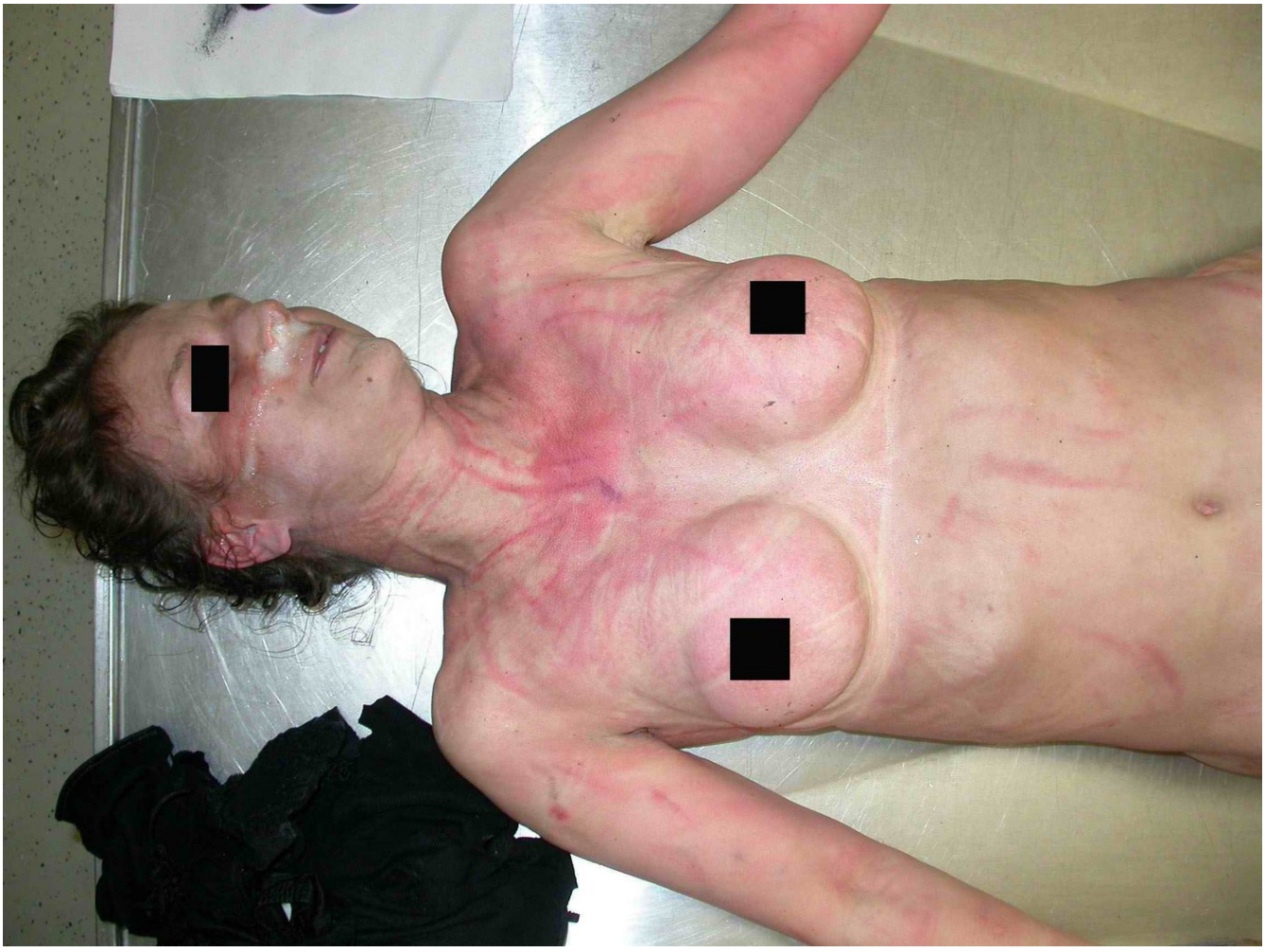

Figure 2. Striated reddening of the skin on the chest up to the neck, no hematoma marks; fungus on the nose.

Foaming fungus had formed on the corpse's nose and mouth. Several regionally parallel narrow striations were found on the front of the corpse, mainly on both thighs as well as on the neck and neckline. On the back of the body such skin changes were merely visible on both flanks. On the front of the thighs there were also several blue marks up to 4 cm in diameter (Figures 1-2). There was no evidence on the extremities indicative of a struggle in self defence. There was no sign of any clot formation. The fingernails were intact. A green material adhered to the finger ends and was found under the nails. When the Irish Setter was laid on its side, a red fluid seeped out of its muzzle. Rigor mortis was complete. There were no external signs of injury on the dog. A green material adhered to all four paws, particularly under the claws themselves.

Further measures taken at the location where the bodies were found

Both ponds were drained, revealing a thick layer of algae over the pond lining. The front pond showed nothing unusual. On the bottom of the rear pond lay a pair of jeans with rolled up bottoms. Evidence of scratching was found on the layer of algae at the bottom of the pond, but the algae had neither been rubbed nor scratched off, and there was no damage at all at the pond's edges.

During further questioning, the tenant of the stables stated that he had never seen the woman in the orchard. The animal always wore a collar with a tag and was kept on a lead. Another person living nearby reported that he had seen the woman and her dog on the aforementioned property several times before.

Results of the post-mortem on the woman's body

Macroscopic and microscopic observations revealed

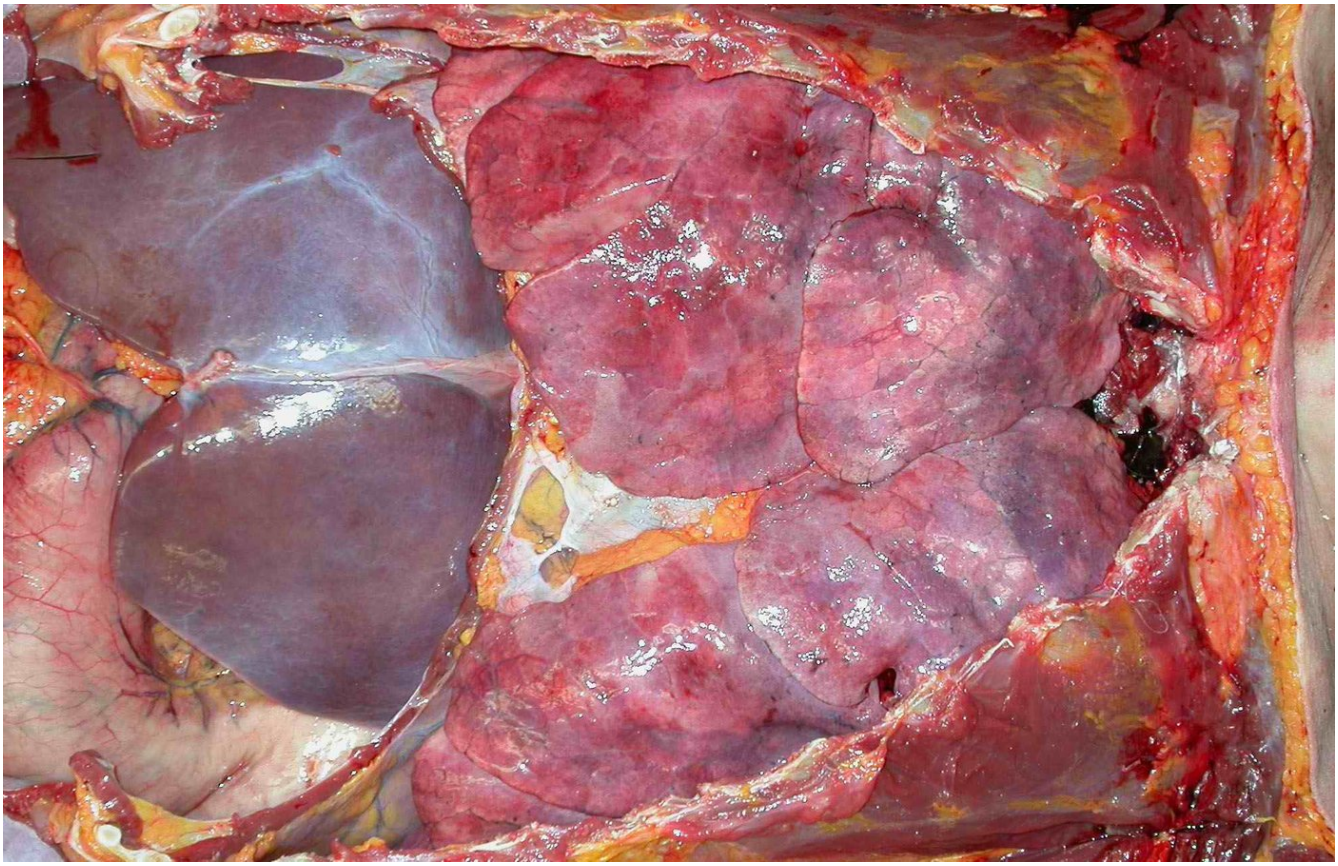

Figure 3. Post-mortem state of the woman with markedly inflated lungs.

Extensive acute pulmonary emphysema with overlapping of both lungs in situ (Figure 3). Interstitial and intra-alveolar pulmonary edema (Figure 6a), lung vessels filled with blood, foaming fluid in the airways, cerebral edema, acute accumulation of blood in the abdominal organs. Under the reddened striations of the skin were slight, fresh haemorrhages, partly involving only the cutis, partly reaching or limited to (Figure 4) the subcutaneous adipose tissue. There were also blotty markings caused by fresh haemorrhages reaching the subcutaneous layer on the front of the thighs.

Toxicology and blood alcohol analysis revealed

Physiological blood alcohol in the blood from the femoral veins. No evidence of foreign substances in blood from heart and in liver and kidney tissue.

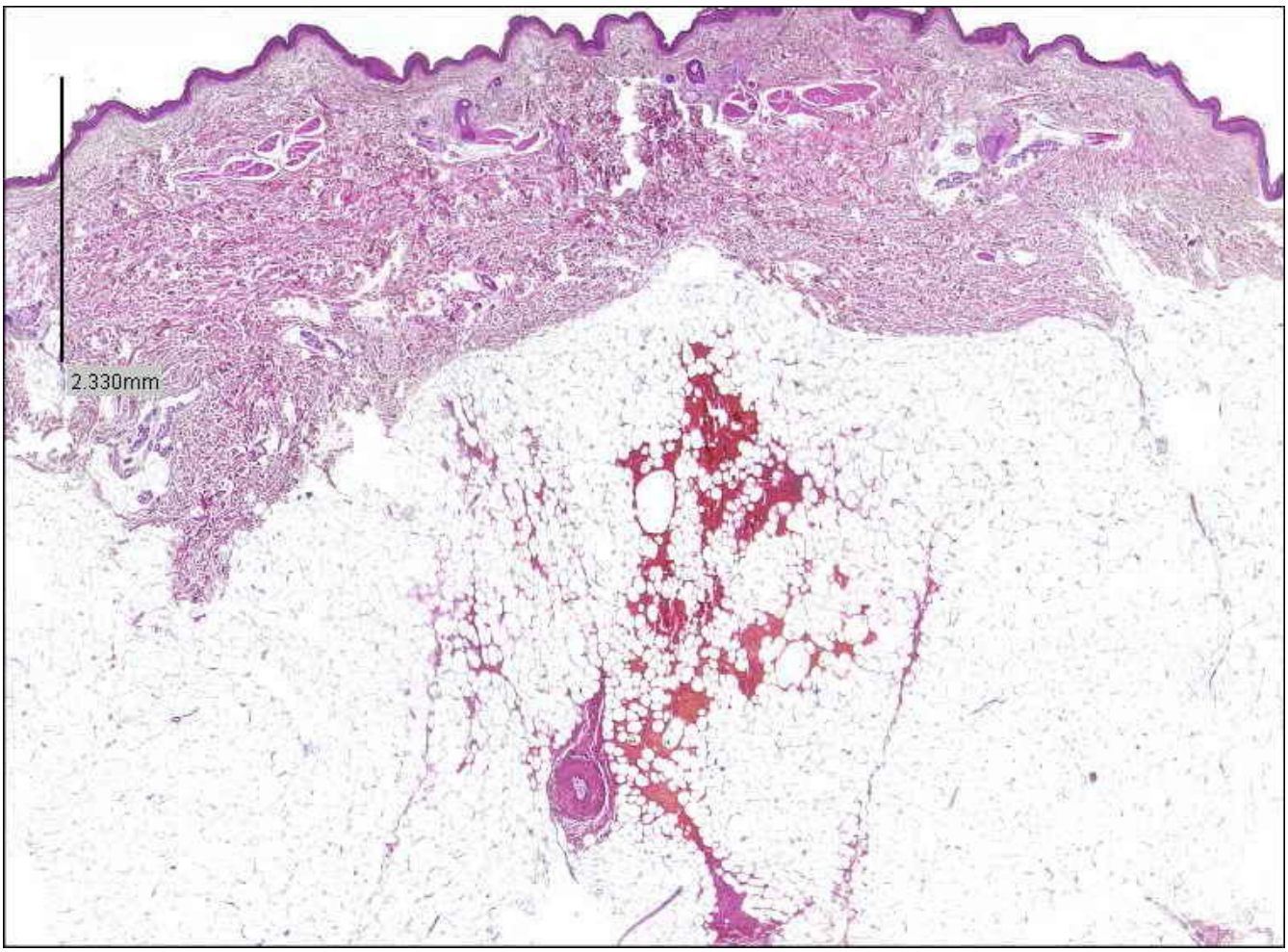

Figure 4. Narrow striated reddening in the skin form the chest; isolated subcutaneous hematoma (H & E stain).

Results of the post-mortem on the dog

Macroscopic and microscopic observations revealed

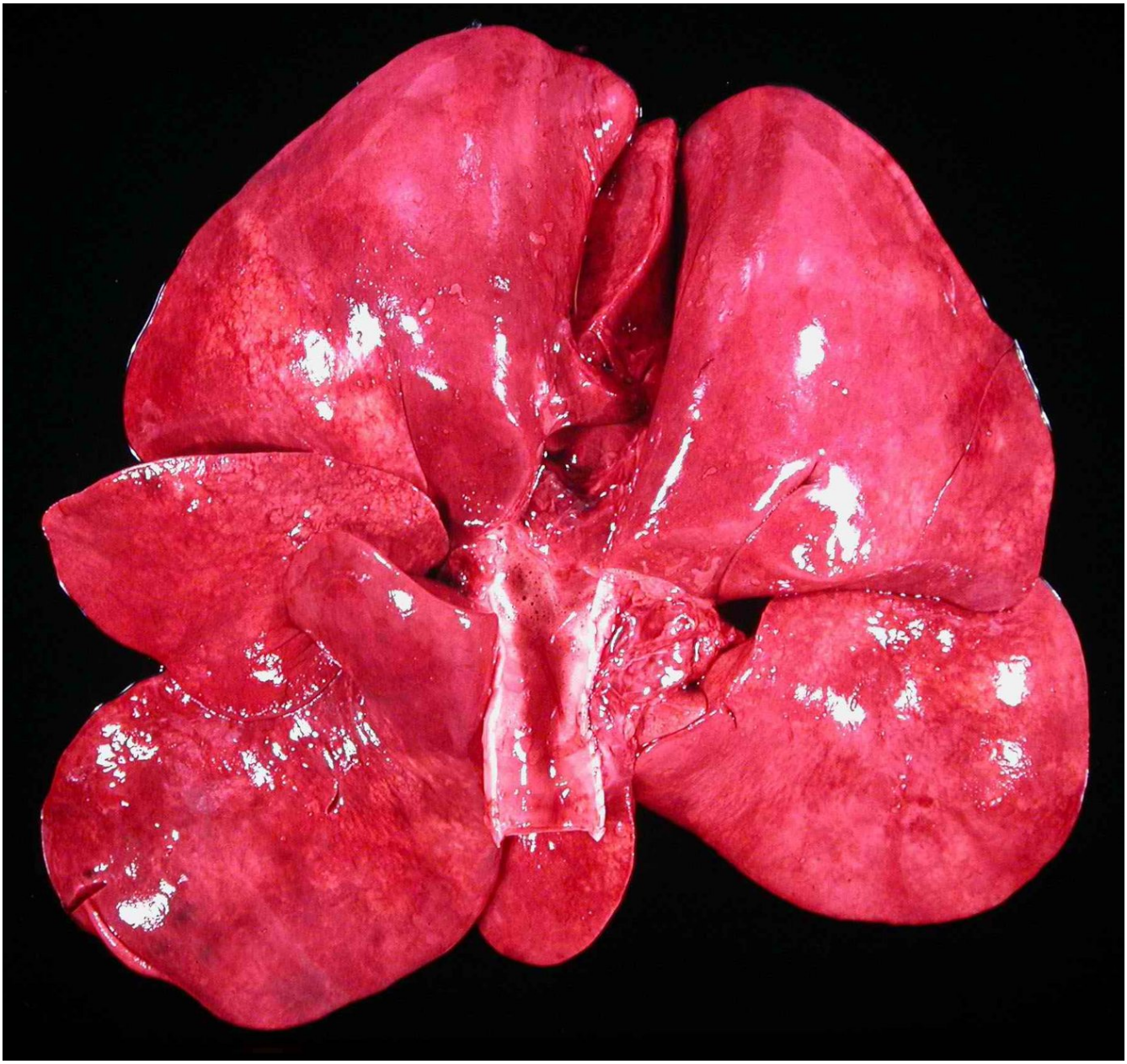

Figure 5. Strongly over-inflated lungs of the dog, foamy secretions in the bronchi.

Skin and subcutaneous layers undamaged. Extensive, acute, diffuse alveolar pulmonary emphysema and oedema, singular sub-pleural haemorrhages (Figures 5, 6b). Moderate acute congestion of the liver. On and under the claws on front and hind paws algal residue consistent with the algae on the pond lining. Blood cells or fibres not found.

Toxicology revealed

No evidence for foreign substances in blood taken from the heart.

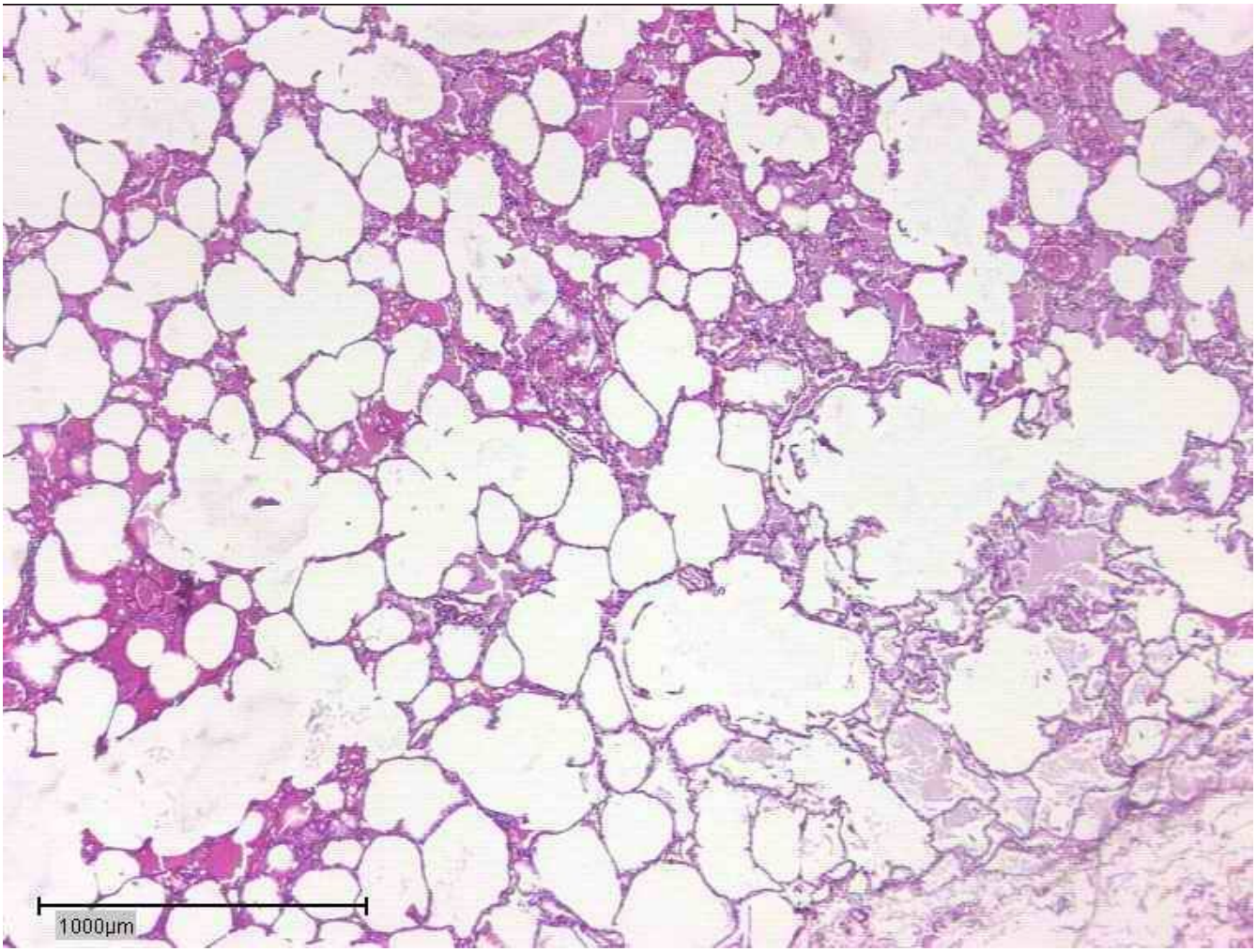

Figure 6. Comparative histology of the lungs (a) of the woman (b) of the dog (H & E stain); in both cases emphysema and diffuse edema are visible.

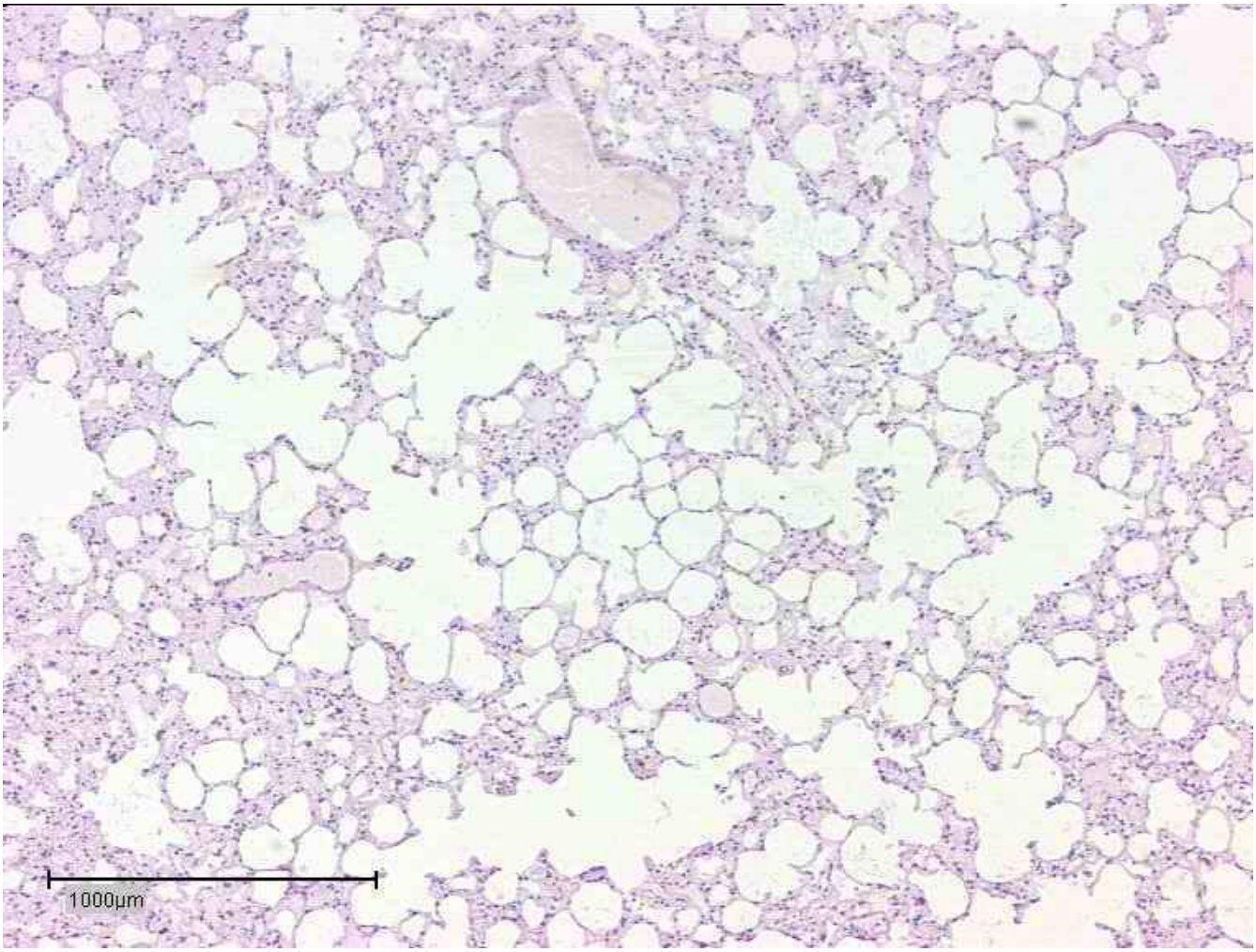

Figure 6. Comparative histology of the lungs (a) of the woman (b) of the dog (H & E stain); in both cases emphysema and diffuse edema are visible.

Discussion

Morphological findings

According to the results from the post-mortems of both the woman and the Irish Setter, death occurred by drowning. The narrow, striated, superficial, fresh haematoma which were found on the front of the woman's body can be explained as originating from the dog's claws. Particularly the prominent middle claw of the dog's paw should be considered causal. The fresh haematoma on the anterior side of the lower extremities can be explained by the strong kicking of the dog's hind legs in the water. The fact that the skin remained mostly undamaged, as revealed by refined analysis of the tissue, would be due to the protection from the clothing. Thus, it was assumed that the woman entered the water fully dressed and had originally been wearing her jeans.

According to the morphological findings, there is no evidence for the involvement of a third party in the death of the woman. Injury to the dog caused by a third party or by its owner (in order to carry out an "extended suicide") through a blunt or sharp instrument can be ruled out.

The pattern of injuries on the woman's body suggests they were caused by the dog swimming and probably panicking. Time of death could not be established due to the unusual circumstances of the place of discovery, i.e. outdoors and in water, and the drastic differences in temperature between day and night. From the morphological findings, the following alternative scenarios are plausible:

1) accident and unsuccessful attempt to rescue the dog: the dog fell into the pond, the woman tried to save it 2) suicide: it is not possible to exclude the theory that the woman went into the water of her own accord and that the dog jumped in after her 3) extended suicide: the woman took the dog into the water and embraced it so as to pull it under the water with her

Results of the investigation

Consistent with the results of the morphological examination, there was no evidence for a struggle at the place of discovery.

It remains unclear how, why and when the woman and her dog entered the orchard. As the gate was locked, both could only have gained access to the property at that point where the fence was pushed down. The witnesses' statement differ in answer to whether the woman had entered the property on other occasions. It is feasible to assume that the unleashed Setter may have run off during their walk, then jumped inside the enclosed property. Another possibility would be that the woman entered the property with her dog with the intention of letting it off the lead.

The picture built up by evidence at the pond does not allow any unequivocal conclusions as to a) from which part of the pond and b) what order the woman and her dog entered the water. The fact that the majority of the scratch marks in the layer of algae on the pond lining obviously stem from the dog, and that the woman hastily and partly undressed on the pond edge suggests that the dog was in the water longer, i.e. entered before she did.

The walls of the pond, the depth of the water and the distance between the water surface and the pond edge could explain why the Setter was unable to get out of the water without help. In retrospect, the woman could have saved herself using the thick plastic hose.

Analytical casework - aspects of information about the victim

Judging from the information available - admittedly it is not complete - the woman had learnt to organise her daily life and to plan for all eventualities; she seems to have taken seriously and catered for the demands of others, including those of her dog. These qualities would not be consistent with the idea of her taking her dog into the water with her to drown it and herself in an extended suicide. It seems more likely that she would have killed the dog beforehand in a less painful way, if she had been considering such a move at all. If the woman had intended to simply commit suicide, she would have left the dog at home.

The woman's lifestyle seems to have been restricted by the limitations she herself imposed. The impression of a structured, ordered lifestyle, as created, could be explained by her desire to be master of herself and others. On the other hand, it could also be the expression of a coercive survival strategy whereby the principle of "order" compensates for the deficits when dealing with the unexpected.

According to the family's statement, the woman was primarily concerned with the wellbeing of others. However, another side of the woman's character is exposed, namely her desire for a little more freedom without impinging on the demands of her loved ones, e.g. her work as a helper in the shop. Based on her husband's nebular statement, one can only speculate about a possible, if only incomplete, attempt to escape out of life in a rut, e.g. through an affair.

Shortly before her death, her own interests were becoming increasingly important to her. She expressed the desire to further her education, to develop herself further. Also, she opposed her

husband's wish to change his job and move house. It seems that the woman was in a phase of transition. The exacerbation of her dermatological condition two months beforehand might be the manifestation of some internal dissatisfaction with her lot.

Overall, one can observe a phase of personal conflict arising out of pressure and tension in the family; on the one hand she was aware of what was expected of her, on the other hand she also discovered she had personal desires and hoped to fulfil these. In this psychological state of ambiguity, which she had hitherto avoided, she may have been confronted with a new crisis whilst being in familiar surroundings (walking her dog): the dog entered the pond, possibly as a result of the woman's increasing inattentiveness caused by her preoccupation with herself or her desire for freedom, and was unable to get out without help. Under these circumstances, which she possibly viewed as the result of her growing selfishness, her inability to cope with an unforeseen crisis became apparent. This might explain why a woman who was usually so careful and planned ahead, jumped into the water without taking precautions, why she did not consider alternatives, e.g. notifying the tenant of the stables or taking steps to ensure she and her dog could get out of the pond again unharmed, and why she did not let go of the dog, not even to save herself. She does not seem to have realised that the Setter, a hunting dog and lover of water, would actually have been suited to remaining in the water over a longer period of time. However, it must remain unanswered whether she had studied the abilities of this breed of dog beforehand, or whether the dog was bought for aesthetic reasons only.

When looking at morphology, the results of the investigation and when deliberating various scenarios, whilst taking into account the character of both victims (by using analytical aspects of the case), some questions remain unanswered. Overall, it is most likely that the dog jumped into the pond first. The following action taken by the woman, however dramatic, should thus be classified as an unsuccessful attempt to rescue her dog.

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