2008: A review of hair analysis in post-mortem cases

Jana Carga, Joanna Hockenhull
Analysed by: Dr. Sooyen Lee, Rosa Cordero
Toxicology Unit, Division of Investigative Science
Imperial College London

HAIR ANALYSIS IS NEEDED TO DEMONSTRATE CHRONIC COCAINE USE:

Cocaine use is widespread, in the cases studied the user’s age varied from 18 to 64 years old. Deaths associated with its use may go undetected. Cocaine causes few very acute deaths, but chronic use may cause fatal cardiac disease and may be linked to depression leading to suicide.

FREQUENCY OF COCAINE STATED IN HISTORY and/or DETECTED IN BLOOD and/or HAIR in 45 CASES

COCAINE AND SUICIDE:

- The most common cause of death was suicide by hanging.
- Out of 32 cases where suicide was the mode of death cocaine was detected in the hair for 16 cases.

SUDDEN UNEXPLAINED DEATH:

Cocaine causes vascular disease and in general there is little to distinguish cocaine-induced vascular disease from naturally occurring vascular disease at post-mortem. Heart damage is a frequent complication of chronic cocaine use. Therefore it is vital to get a reliable drug history in order to determine the cause of death.

From the information provided in the cases shown in the table, there was no obvious cause of death. (If there was no indication of recent drug use in all of the cases cocaine was detected in the blood sample or there was no sample available, but cocaine was detected in hair analysis. Cocaine use could have contributed to these deaths)