



S15. NARCOTICS AND POSTMORTEM PROCESS

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The term narcotic was initially used to connote the opioids. In its current use the term to indicate any illicit psychoactive substance. Toxic substance is any substance which when absorbed into the blood seriously affects health or destroys life. Drugs may be absorbed orally, by intravenous, subcutaneous or rarely intramuscular injection, by smoking or by nasal sniffing.

The routine at autopsy, in respect of obtaining samples for toxicological analysis, is altered according to the route of administration. For example, if drugs may have been taken by nasal route, such as cocaine and heroin, then dry swabs from each nostril should be taken.

When poisoning is suspected, or when no gross pathological process has been found at autopsy to adequately explain the death, it is mandatory for specimens to be taken for toxicological analysis, each specimen must be retained in a separate, properly cleaned and sealed container. These must be identified and labeled with the case number, the name of the deceased and the date, time taken and site of collection. The specimens must be taken before autopsy so as to avoid contamination. Biological fluids and tissues taken prior to death must also be retained and submitted for analysis. Antemortem blood specimens taken on admission to hospital are more relevant in persons taking hours or days to die than are those taken at autopsy.

No matter how good one's toxicology laboratory, it cannot function if there is failure to collect the proper specimens, in adequate quantity, and in the proper conditions.