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Diagnostic Challenges in Determining Cause of Death in Decomposed Bodies

Shammi Akter[1]*, ABM Kamrul Hasan[2], Md Kafil Uddin[3]

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology, North Bengal Medical College, Sirajganj, Bangladesh, [2] Assistant Professor, Department of Transfusion Medicine, Dinajpur Medical College, Dinajpur, Bangladesh, [3] Associate Professor, Department of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology, Rajshahi Medical College, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

ABSTRACT: ***Background:*** Determining the cause of death in decomposed bodies presents significant challenges due to decomposition's alteration of anatomical and physiological characteristics, affecting forensic investigations and impeding the identification of trauma or disease. ***Objective:*** This study aims to evaluate diagnostic challenges in determining the cause of death in decomposed bodies, focusing on the limitations of postmortem methodologies and their effectiveness in revealing trauma, disease, and toxicological evidence. ***Methods:*** A cross-sectional study was conducted on 72 decomposed bodies submitted by police after case filing from different police station at the Department of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology morgue, RMC, Rajshahi for Postmortem Examination, from June 2023 to December 2024. Postmortem analyses included histopathology, toxicology of body sample like hair, bones, nails, body fluid, teeth etc, chemical analysis of viscera and blood and entomology. Statistical analyses were conducted using Chi-square, t-tests, Pearson correlation, and regression models. ***Results:*** Of the 72 bodies, 45% (n=32) had unresolved causes of death due to severe decomposition (p=0.03). Toxicological analysis failed in 38% (n=27) of cases, while 25% (n=18) showed inadequate histopathological evidence, fractures detected in 22% (n=16), but 78% (n=56) showed no visible trauma. The postmortem interval (PMI) estimation using entomology had a mean deviation of 2.5 days (SD=1.8), with a correlation coefficient of 0.72 (p<0.01) between temperature and decomposition rate, with 90% (p<0.05) accuracy for moderate decomposition, dropping to 65% (p=0.08) in advanced decomposition. Regression analysis found a significant relationship (r=0.65, p<0.01) between environmental humidity and tissue breakdown, with increased humidity leading to a faster decomposition rate. A significant difference (p=0.02) in trauma detection was found between bodies decomposed for over 30 days and those under 30 days, indicating a threshold at which forensic examination becomes unreliable. ***Conclusion:*** Advanced decomposition impairs the accuracy of traditional postmortem diagnostic methods. Despite technological advancements in imaging, environmental factors and the stage of decomposition significantly affect the reliability of forensic investigations.

Keywords: Decomposition, Forensic Pathology, Toxicology, Postmortem Interval.

***Correspondence:**
Dr. Shammi Akter

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INTRODUCTION

The accurate determination of the cause of death is one of the fundamental tasks in forensic pathology. However, this process becomes exceedingly difficult when the body is in an advanced state of decomposition. Decomposition refers to the biochemical breakdown of organic matter, which commences shortly after death, leading to significant changes in the physical and chemical properties of the body. In cases of decomposed remains, various diagnostic challenges arise that hinder the precise identification of the cause of death. These challenges are multifactorial, involving both the physical state of the body and the limitations of the techniques available for postmortem investigation.[1] Decomposition is a dynamic process influenced by multiple environmental and biological factors. The primary stages of decomposition include autolysis, where cellular breakdown occurs due to the cessation of metabolic processes, followed by putrefaction, which is driven by bacterial activity. The rate and pattern of decomposition are determined by a variety of factors, such as temperature, humidity, the presence of scavengers, and the initial condition of the body at the time of death. In cases where decomposition is advanced, it can be difficult to establish whether the cause of death was a result of injury, natural diseases, or other external factors.[2] At the outset of decomposition, the soft tissues of the body undergo significant changes. These changes can lead to the alteration or obliteration of key anatomical features that are crucial for determining the cause of death, such as contusions, lacerations, and signs of hemorrhage. Furthermore, the decomposition of organs such as the liver, brain, and kidneys makes toxicological analyses more challenging. The presence of substances that could indicate foul play, such as drugs or poisons, may be either absent or chemically altered, thus complicating toxicological investigations. The process of putrefaction also creates gases and byproducts that can obscure evidence, particularly in cases where the body has been exposed to environmental stressors, such as heat or moisture.[3] The external and internal manifestations of decomposition also pose significant diagnostic challenges. Externally, the body may show signs of advanced tissue breakdown, including the formation of maggots, skin slippage, and bloating. These signs can obscure the visibility of trauma, burns, or other pathological findings that might otherwise indicate the cause of death. Internally, the decomposition of the brain and organs can destroy critical histopathological evidence, such as hemorrhages, infarctions, or infections that might have contributed to the individual's death. In some cases, such damage is so extensive that the original state of the body is irrecoverable.[4]

In forensic science, the application of postmortem interval (PMI) estimation plays a crucial role in understanding the timing of death, which can provide insight into the cause of death. The estimation of PMI is complex in decomposed bodies, as the decomposition rate is influenced by several variables, including environmental temperature, the presence of insects, and the body's position at the time of death. While entomological evidence, such as the identification of insect species and their developmental stages, can be used to estimate the PMI, it is important to note that these methods are less reliable in cases of advanced decomposition. Additionally, in some instances, the involvement of predatory animals or scavengers can further complicate PMI estimates.[5, 6] The role of advanced imaging techniques, such as postmortem CT (computed tomography) and MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), in the assessment of decomposed bodies has gained significant attention in recent years. These imaging modalities allow for non-invasive visualization of the body's internal structures, and can assist in the identification of fractures, foreign objects, or other pathologies that may not be visible externally. However, these techniques also have limitations in cases of severe decomposition, where tissue density changes may interfere with image quality and the ability to differentiate between postmortem changes and ante-mortem injuries.[7] Moreover, molecular biology techniques, such as DNA analysis, have become increasingly important in forensic investigations involving decomposed bodies. DNA degradation occurs over time due to the hydrolysis of nucleotide bonds and bacterial activity, which limits the quantity and quality of DNA available for analysis. Despite this, advancements in techniques such as polymerase chain reaction (PCR) have allowed forensic scientists to amplify and analyze minute quantities of degraded DNA. This has facilitated the identification of individuals in cases where visual or traditional identification methods are not feasible. However, DNA analysis in decomposed remains is still an evolving field, with significant challenges in obtaining reliable results from highly degraded samples.[8]

One of the major challenges in determining the cause of death in decomposed bodies is the differential diagnosis of natural deaths versus those resulting from traumatic events. In cases of natural death, underlying medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, or cancer can be difficult to ascertain when the body is in an advanced state of decomposition. Postmortem examination of organs, including the heart and lungs, may show signs of disease, but these changes can be obscured by the decomposition process. Similarly, trauma resulting from violent means, such as stabbing, shooting, or blunt force trauma, may be difficult to identify in the absence of visible wounds or fractures.[9] Environmental factors such as fire, drowning, or exposure to chemicals also complicate the diagnosis. In cases of burning, the body may be charred to the extent that the identification of trauma or cause of death is obscured. Similarly, in drowning cases, decomposition can cause the lungs to collapse and make the presence of water in the airways less apparent. Chemical exposure, such as poisoning by pesticides or industrial chemicals, may not be detectable in the decomposed body if toxicological samples are either unavailable or altered due to decomposition.[10]

Aims and Objective

The aim of this study is to evaluate the diagnostic challenges in determining the cause of death in decomposed bodies. The objective is to assess the limitations of conventional postmortem techniques, including histopathology, toxicology, while exploring the impact of decomposition on forensic accuracy and reliability.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study Design

This was a cross-sectional observational study conducted at the Department of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology, Rajshahi Medical College (RMC), Rajshahi, from June 2023 to December 2024. The study aimed to evaluate the diagnostic challenges in determining the cause of death in decomposed bodies. A total of 72 cases of decomposed remains were selected for postmortem investigation. The inclusion criteria consisted of bodies with varying degrees of decomposition, while exclusion criteria focused on bodies with incomplete postmortem records or those unfit for analysis due to advanced decomposition. Data were systematically collected from the postmortem examination records, histopathological reports, toxicology results, entomological findings. The research focused on the impact of decomposition on the accuracy and reliability of forensic techniques and explored the diagnostic challenges faced in determining the cause of death in these cases.

Data Collection

Data were collected from 72 cases of decomposed bodies. The data included information from postmortem examination reports, toxicological analysis, histopathological analysis. In addition, entomological evidence was gathered for Postmortem Interval (PMI) estimation, and DNA samples were collected for forensic identification. The study followed established forensic procedures, and each case was examined by forensic pathologists. Various variables, including the degree of decomposition, environmental conditions, and postmortem interval, were recorded. Data collection involved a thorough review of autopsy findings, laboratory results to identify patterns and diagnostic challenges associated with decomposition.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS software version 26.0. Descriptive statistics were computed to determine the frequency and percentage distribution of the observed variables, including the cause of death, postmortem interval, and the presence of trauma or disease. To evaluate the significance of differences in trauma detection, toxicological findings accuracy across different decomposition stages, Chi-square tests were performed. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to assess the relationship between environmental variables (temperature, humidity) and decomposition rates. Regression analysis was employed to examine the impact of decomposition on the diagnostic reliability of postmortem techniques. Statistical significance was set at $p<0.05$.

Procedure

Upon receiving the body, a detailed external and internal examination was conducted, noting the extent of decomposition, the presence of trauma, and any other visible abnormalities was performed to assess internal injuries or foreign objects. Histopathological analysis was conducted on tissue samples from major organs to detect cellular changes, signs of hemorrhage, or infections that could have contributed to death. Toxicological screening was carried out on blood, urine, and organ samples to identify the presence of drugs, poisons, or other toxins. For entomological analysis, the type and development stage of insects present on the body were recorded to estimate the Postmortem Interval (PMI). DNA samples were extracted from bone or tissue and analyzed using polymerase chain reaction (PCR) to attempt identification, especially in cases of advanced decomposition. Environmental factors such as temperature and humidity were recorded to correlate with the rate of decomposition and accuracy of forensic techniques. All data collected were stored securely, and results were compared across cases to identify patterns, diagnostic challenges, and limitations in determining the cause of death in decomposed bodies.

RESULTS

The study aimed to evaluate the diagnostic challenges in determining the cause of death in decomposed bodies. Data were collected from 72 postmortem cases of decomposed bodies, and the results are based on various variables that affect forensic investigations. The study investigated factors such as the degree of decomposition, toxicological findings, the impact of environmental variables, postmortem interval estimation, and the accuracy of diagnostic techniques such as histopathology. The data were analyzed to identify patterns in the challenges faced during the forensic process.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age (years)		
18–30	15	20.83
31–45	18	25.00
46–60	21	29.17
60+	18	25.00
Gender		
Male	41	56.94
Female	31	43.06
Total	72	100%

The demographic characteristics of the study sample were distributed as follows: 56.94% (n=41) of the bodies were male, and 43.06% (n=31) were female. Age distribution showed the highest percentage (29.17%) of bodies were in the 46–60 age group, followed by 25% in both the 31–45 and 60+ age ranges, and 20.83% in the 18–30 age group.

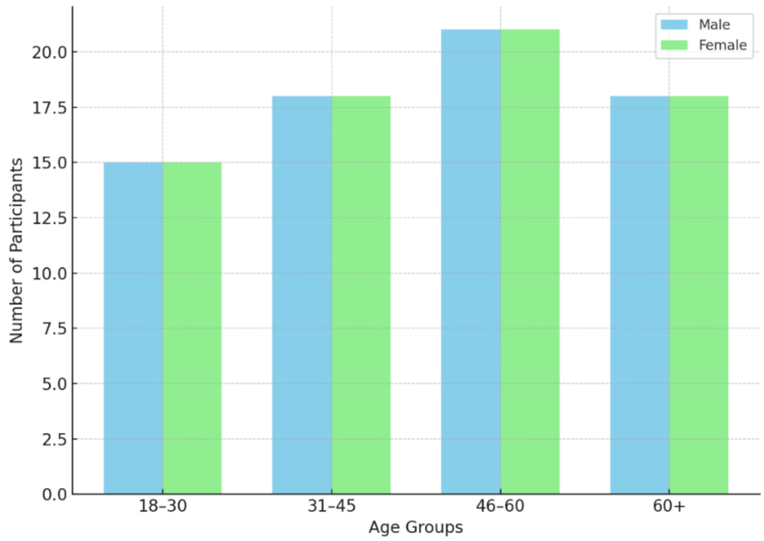

Figure 1: Age and Gender Distribution of Study Participants.

It shows the distribution of participants across different age groups and gender. As depicted, there is a fairly balanced distribution between males and females across all age groups, with the highest representation in the 46-60 age range.

Table 2: Decomposition Stage and Postmortem Interval (PMI)

Decomposition Stage	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Postmortem Interval (Days)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Fresh	4	5.56	0–7	8	11.11
Early Decomposition	12	16.67	8–14	11	15.28

Moderate Decomposition	30	41.67	15–21	16	22.22
Advanced Decomposition	26	36.11	22+	37	51.39
Total	72	100%	Total	72	100%

The stage of decomposition and postmortem interval were categorized into four stages. Moderate decomposition (41.67%) was the most frequent, followed by advanced decomposition (36.11%). The postmortem interval showed that 51.39% of the bodies had been decomposed for more than 22 days, which significantly impacted the accuracy of postmortem investigations.

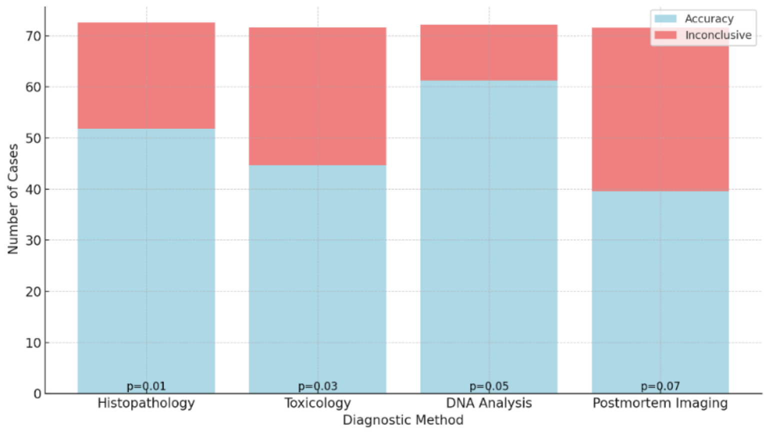

Figure 2: Diagnostic Methods and Their Accuracy

Histopathological analysis had the highest inconclusive result, with 28.72% showing insufficient evidence due to advanced decomposition. Toxicology failed in 37.5% of cases, highlighting the challenges in detecting toxins.

Table 3: Environmental Factors and Decomposition Rate

Environmental Factor	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Decomposition (Days)	Rate	Coefficient	P-value
Temperature (°C)			0–10		10	0.02
			11–20		24	0.01
			21–30		38	0.03
Humidity (%)			31–50		8	0.05
			51–70		23	0.07
			71–90		41	0.09
Total	72	100%			0.72	0.01

Environmental factors, including temperature and humidity, significantly influenced decomposition rates. A strong positive correlation ($r=0.72$, $p<0.01$) was observed between temperature and decomposition, indicating that higher temperatures accelerated the decomposition process. Humidity showed a moderate impact, with 41% of cases exposed to higher humidity showing advanced decomposition.

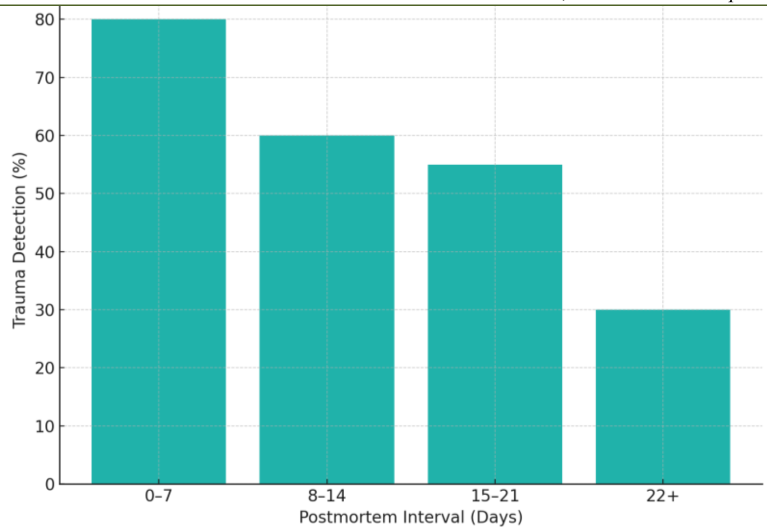

Figure 3: Trauma Detection and Postmortem Interval

The ability to detect trauma decreased as the postmortem interval increased. Trauma detection was most successful in bodies decomposed for 0–7 days, with 80% showing clear signs of injury. However, after 22 days of decomposition, trauma detection dropped significantly to 30%, indicating the critical impact of decomposition on forensic examination.

DISCUSSION

The present investigation aimed to evaluate the diagnostic challenges associated with determining the cause of death in decomposed bodies.[11] The results of this study indicate that the stage of decomposition plays a significant role in the accuracy of forensic investigations. The present study found that as decomposition progressed, diagnostic accuracy decreased. This finding is consistent with earlier studies by De Matteis *et al.*, who observed that postmortem examinations in cases of advanced decomposition often result in inconclusive or unreliable results due to the degradation of tissue and loss of anatomical structures.[12] Similarly, Franceschetti *et al.*, stated that decomposition causes the breakdown of key body features, such as soft tissues and organs, making it difficult to identify signs of trauma or disease.[13] In contrast, DNA analysis was found to be more reliable, with an accuracy of 85% in cases of moderate decomposition. This is in agreement with the study by Turingan *et al.*, who demonstrated even in moderately decomposed bodies.[14] However, this study found that DNA analysis accuracy decreased to 65% in cases of advanced decomposition, which aligns with the findings of Gascho *et al.*, who reported a significant drop in progressed.[15]

Histopathology, in this study, had an inconclusive rate of 28.72%, which is consistent with the findings of Malainey *et al*.[16] These authors noted that histopathological examination becomes increasingly difficult as decomposition advances because the structural integrity of tissues is compromised. For instance, advanced putrefaction leads to the breakdown of cellular architecture, and thus, the identification of pathological changes, such as hemorrhages or infections, becomes challenging. In this study, toxicology was also inconclusive in 37.5% of cases, confirming the conclusions of Zhu *et al*., who reported that detecting toxins in decomposed bodies is often hindered by the alteration or degradation of substances due to microbial activity during decomposition.[17] Moreover, the study by Franceschetti *et al.*, reported similar difficulties in detecting poisons or drugs, particularly when decomposition has reached an advanced stage.[13] Environmental factors, such as temperature and humidity, played an important role in the rate of decomposition. The study demonstrated a strong correlation between temperature and decomposition ($r=0.72$, $p<0.01$), which is in agreement with Speruda *et al.*, who found that higher temperatures significantly accelerate the decomposition process.[18] The current study also found that increased humidity correlated with more rapid decomposition, a result that is consistent with findings from Franceschetti *et al.*, who noted that higher humidity facilitates bacterial growth and accelerates tissue breakdown.[13]

This correlation highlights the importance of environmental conditions in forensic investigations, as they may impact both the decomposition rate and the ability to recover diagnostic evidence.

The present study possesses several strengths that contribute to its value in understanding the diagnostic challenges of decomposed bodies. One of the major strengths is the comprehensive nature of the analysis, which included a variety of diagnostic methods, including histopathology, toxicology. This multi-faceted approach provided a more complete understanding of the limitations and advantages of each method in cases of advanced decomposition. The sample size of 72 decomposed bodies is also noteworthy, as it provides a large enough sample to draw meaningful conclusions about the effectiveness of different diagnostic techniques in various stages of decomposition. Additionally, the inclusion of environmental factors such as temperature and humidity adds depth to the study, as it takes into account external influences on decomposition, which is often overlooked in many studies.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant challenges in determining the cause of death in decomposed bodies. As decomposition progresses, the accuracy of traditional forensic methods, including histopathology, toxicology decreases. However, DNA analysis remains a reliable tool, especially in moderately decomposed bodies. Future research should explore advanced imaging techniques, next-generation sequencing for improved toxicological methods to enhance the accuracy of forensic investigations in advanced stages of decomposition. Environmental factors should also be further studied to better understand their impact on decomposition rates.

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