

## Observation is main tool for coroner's investigator

We pulled up to the small house in one of Cuyahoga County's many suburbs. Outside, a young cop shivered in his patrol car, filling out paperwork.

As I struggled to zip the black jacket with CORONER emblazoned in big block letters on the breast and back, I wished again that I'd worn a tie. In the pre-dawn cold at home earlier, a hoodie had seemed a good idea. I figured to be outside a lot. But now, all I could think of was that I should've opted for a tie.

"What do I do?" I asked Al Clark, the lanky man in the driver's seat of the county-owned Malibu. Clark is in his second career. The retired Lakewood police captain spent 33 years in his first. On this one, he doesn't have to carry a gun, but he's still got a badge. It dangles from a chain around his neck — eye level for some people who meet the 6-foot-3 Bay Village resident — and it says Cuyahoga County Coroner Investigator.

"Just observe," Clark said. "Just observe."

Like I would do anything else.

We went inside. I won't tell you much about the surroundings. I can't tell you too much about the surroundings. Not that I didn't notice them, but this is a real case, with real people and real unanswered questions. I know that Clark noted everything, from what books were in the room to whether there were any butts in the nightstand ashtrays to whether the glass on a dresser smelled of alcohol.

Any one of those notes could prove crucial.

Last year, Coroner Frank Miller III's staff autopsied almost 1,600 of us. That's less than half of the deaths reported to the office — which has but 17 field investigators like Clark to provide 24-hour coverage, seven days a week. Their findings are as much a part of the solution to the puzzle of why and how someone died as a blood screening.

When I was doing autopsies, we had a man who was killed in a car crash. The shattered ribs, ruptured aorta and other injuries we found showed his death was not instantaneous, but it was inevitable. The question became: Why did a man whose body bore no evidence of a seizure, stroke or heart attack wreck his car?

Though it's still unofficial, the answer might have come from an investigator on the scene, who learned from a witness that the man had been coughing or choking just before the crash. On a hunch, pathology assistant Michael Vitovich checked the dead man's teeth and found bits of chewing tobacco. Nobody knows for sure, but it could be that he lost control of the car after accidentally swallowing or gagging on the tobacco.

SEE CHUCK | E3

### OJT FACTS

#### Cuyahoga County coroner's investigator

**Fear factor:** 7. Autopsies the week before prepared me to face death.

**Reality check:** Death can come to anyone, at any time.

**Realization factor:** I'm not in a hurry for death, but now, for some reason, I'm not so frightened of it.

## CHUCK from E1

### Observation is main tool

That kind of information is why chief investigator Joe Stopak sends members of his 2-year-old department to the scene. They're not policemen, although they're often mistaken for them by people at the scene. Stripped to its core, a cop's job is to assign blame. A coroner's investigator is concerned with how and why someone died.

It's not been an easy childhood for the department, which among other things is charged with finding and notifying the deceased's next of kin. Investigators are slowly winning the cooperation of police who first thought they were there to second-guess them. Then there is dealing with the distraught families, who sometimes vent their hurt as anger and regard the coroner's investigators as the angels of death.

And finally — a word well suited to the coroner's office — there is reality itself.

William "Bo" Scott is an investigator who works in the "Receiving Department." Among his many duties is cleaning the bodies that come in. On more than one occasion, he's pulled back the sheet to find a friend. Who among us can imagine such a shock?

You stop, you realize, and you do your job, Scott said. But you never forget.

In much that same way, I will never forget what I thought was an unusual calm in that suburban home. My parents died after lengthy, horrible illnesses. I knew their deaths meant the end of their pain, and still my tears flowed for what seemed like days. How then, I wondered, could the family in that suburban home be dry-eyed less than two hours after finding their loved one gone?

The answer, of course, is that everyone grieves differently. Investigators learn to avoid snap judgments . . . or any judgments at all. All they do is what I did that day.

Observe. Just observe.