The circumstances in which a body is found may clearly indicate how the victim died. But what happens if the superficial evidence is inconclusive? In these cases, an autopsy may help the coroner to decide the cause of the fatality, and to discover whether a seemingly innocent death was in fact a disguised homicide.

Deciding the manner of death—suicide, natural, accidental, or homicide—is not the pathologist’s responsibility. However, in seeking the cause of death—such as a gunshot wound to the head—pathologists uncover evidence that points to the manner. The three examples on this page show how a pathologist is a detective of sorts. He uses a process of deduction to discover the facts surrounding a death.

**BODY FOUND AT SCENE OF FIRE**

Is there soot in the air passages?

**BODY FOUND HANGING**

Victim found hanging with signs of death by hypoxia (lack of oxygen). These include blue complexion, pinpoint burst blood vessels, and distended lungs.

Do rope marks on the neck have the inflamed edge of a "vital reaction"?

**BODY FOUND IN WATER**

Is there water in the air passages and stomach, and are the lungs swollen?

**Victim died by wet drowning.** Pathologist looks for signs that the victim struggled to breathe, such as bleeding in the lungs. This and other evidence, such as leaves or twigs held in a viselike grip as victim tried to clutch at something, suggests drowning was an accident.
Blood is cherry red in color. Victim died by poisoning—from either CO in smoke, or cyanide from burning synthetic furnishings. 

Victim died from burns. 

Lacerations on the body may have been caused by fire or by earlier injury. Do they show signs of underlying bleeding? 

Victim may have been dead when the fire started, suggesting arson to conceal evidence of homicide. Pathologist looks for other injuries that may have been hidden by burning. 

Is there carbon monoxide (CO) in the blood, as well as cyanide and other poisons? 

Vitiment may have died of suffocation by inhaling smoke. 

Do burns on the body have the inflamed edge of a "vital reaction," where red blood cells have tried to repair the damage? 

Victim died by suffocation from burns. 

Pathologist looks for evidence of homicide.