



Autopsy.

“Truett McKeehan”

[Part One. Introduction.]

There’s a popular quote from author Stephen King that says, “Monsters are real. And ghosts are real, too. They live inside us. And, sometimes, they win.” It’s a concise, if morbid, thought on the inner demons that we all struggle with in one form or another. Many cases on Autopsy are often the end result of one person’s metaphorical monster winning against another. And if you’re a fan of true crime, you’re likely very aware just how often that occurs.

But if you were to have a conversation with any forensic pathologist, medicolegal death investigator, or coroner, you might be surprised to learn that the amount of harm we do to others pales in comparison to the amount we do to ourselves. And this is all a very polite way of stating that when it comes to the types of cases that come through morgues most often, at least here in the United States, accidental drug overdoses reign king....

We find ourselves at a small home in a lower class suburb on the south side of Nashville, Tennessee. This is the home of Truett Foster McKeehan. Age: 21 years old. Mr. McKeehan is an aspiring hip-hop artist known by various monikers, including TruDog, or, just TRU. He has been working his way into the business hoping to follow in the footsteps of his father, Christian hip-hop artist, Toby McKeehan, more popularly known as TobyMac. Truett has moved here to Nashville after having recently been living in Los Angeles, California – where he had first moved to follow his career dreams. Reasons for his move are publicly, and likely understandably, unknown. Friends and family all speak highly and fondly of him, especially his father. But there does seem to be understated hints that he was dealing with his own personal demons. Namely: addiction.

It’s Wednesday, October 23rd, 2019; a little after 10:30AM. Only a week prior, Truett had performed at his first major gig here in Nashville, which according to reports, had gone exceptionally well. Despite any personal issues, the young artist had seemed excited, enthusiastic, and gracious. And, of course, his father had glowed over him. On this date at this residence, however, a friend of Truett’s arrives for a welfare check after not having heard from him or been able to establish contact. And when there is no response at the door, the friend decides to go ahead and let himself in. He eventually makes his way to the bedroom...which is where he makes the tragic discovery. There, face down in his bed, lies the body of Truett Foster McKeehan.

I am Your Friendly Death Investigator. Let’s do an autopsy.

[Part Two. External.]

“The body is that of a young adult white male measuring 69 inches and weighing 158 pounds. The body is normally developed and appears consistent with the given age of 21 years. Postmortem changes consist of an early state of decomposition, including skin slippage, marbling, fixed livor mortis on the anterior aspect with a patterned texture impression, and green discoloration on the lower abdomen.”

Normal findings here. Decomposition is present but it is early stages. Skin slippage and marbling always typically appear first, but according to the report, there is no abdominal bloating, which can be an early sign as well. There is green discoloration, but only on the lower abdomen. This is usually a decent sign that there still will likely be decent blood samples to collect. As a note: once a body has become very bloated and green on the outside, the chances of getting blood samples for toxicology become very slim.

“The corneas are cloudy. The sclerae and conjunctivae are injected. The irides are brown. The mouth contains natural teeth. The ears, nose and mouth show no abnormalities.”

As with all cases, the sclerae, that is the whites of the eyes, and conjunctivae, the inside of the eyelids, are almost always noted whether there are positive findings or not. There is no noted petechiae for Truett. The doctor does, however, describe them as “injected.” It’s hard to know exactly what a term like that implies. It could simply just mean bloodshot, or maybe just congested. Either way, it’s a finding likely consistent with having been found prone, or facedown, in bed and gravity pulling the settling fluids down towards the face. Otherwise, no real significant findings for the face and head.

“The neck is of normal configuration and there are no palpable masses. The thorax is symmetrical. The abdomen is flat. The extremities are symmetrical normally developed.”

More negative findings. Again, the abdomen is flat, no bloating. No abnormalities or deformities. Letting the reader know that so far, there doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with the young man, externally.

“External examination reveals multiple small healing scars on the extremities.”

Nothing too specific here. Scars on the arms could have come from anywhere. He could simply have been an active young man, or maybe just had a nervous habit of picking at his skin. I included it in the off chance someone might consider scars on the arms to be indicative of suicidal-esque cutting. Usually if that is the case,

there is, normally at least, a pattern, and if it's very obvious, the pathologist likely would've chosen more specific wording in his or her opinion.

[Part Three. Internal.]

Internal examination. "The organs occupy normal positions, and all the internal organs are in a state of autolysis. There are no fluid collections, adhesions, or mass lesions."

Negative findings here. The word "autolysis" can just be interpreted as the organs beginning their normal breakdown via decomposition. As decomposition progresses into moderate stages, fluid collections usually form in the lung cavities and various areas of the abdomen. None are noted here, of course. Adhesions are, well, the bane of any autopsy technicians existence. They occur when bits of tissue slowly form over an organ over time and then adhere to a surrounding mass, whether that mass be another organ, or the wall of a chest cavity; sometimes the heart itself can adhere to the surrounding pericardial sac that holds it. Sometimes the adhesions can be pulled free, not completely unlike Velcro. But sometimes, many times, in fact, they can form so thickly that pieces of organs wind up being torn apart as they're removed. There are a few different causes for this, one of the bigger ones being scar tissue forming after surgery. I won't dwell any further on them, though, as Truett doesn't have adhesions. I bring it up mostly just to let any autopsy technicians out there know, I feel your pain.

"There is no scalp hemorrhage. The skull is without fractures. There is no epidural, subdural or subarachnoid hemorrhage. Serial sections through the cerebral hemispheres, cerebellum, and brain stem reveal no tumor or evidence of infection."

Negative findings here explaining that the scalp, skull, and brain were all checked, and nothing out of the ordinary was found.

"The neck is without soft tissue hemorrhage or palpable fracture and the structures surrounding the upper airway are intact."

Again, as with all autopsies, the neck is a key area that is checked whether foul play is suspected or not. For Mr. McKeehan, all is well.

"The epicardium is intact and smooth. The coronary arteries arise from unobstructed ostia, follow the usual distributions, and are without significant arteriosclerosis. The cardiac valves are normally formed and the chambers are usual dimensions. The atrial and ventricular septa are intact. The myocardium is red-brown, firm and unremarkable. The aorta and its major branches are intact."

Here the doctor is explaining how he checked through the entire functional system of the heart and, again, all is well. No heart disease. No trauma.

“The pulmonary arteries are without thromboemboli on initial incision into the pulmonary trunk and on dissection. On sectioning the pulmonary parenchyma is moderately congested, edematous, and without other focal lesions.”

Here we are checking the arteries of the lungs. Areas are noted as edematous, which simply means they're a bit swollen with fluid which. Now, some of this could be due to decomposition, but this is actually a fairly common finding in overdose cases, specifically with opioids. The drugs cause the lungs to congest with fluid, making breathing more labored which can also be a contributing factor to the death. Thromboemboli, or the singular, thromboembolism, would be a blood clot in the lungs. These usually begin in the pulmonary artery, starting down in the legs, and work their way up to the lungs, where they'll block and essentially cause the victim to suffocate. Again, none are noted here, but as Truett has no real physical evidence externally or internally that can be seen with the naked eye, the pathologist again makes the note so that the reader knows that he was thorough.

Otherwise, the rest of the internal examination contains all negative findings. The liver, pancreas, gallbladder, spleen, kidneys, reproductive organs, musculoskeletal system, are all okay and without issue....

Blood and vitreous are submitted for toxicology. Vitreous is the fluid found inside each of your eyes. The blood taken from Truett for toxicology was femoral blood. Femoral blood is pulled externally - that is, a needle is stuck on the upper inner thigh, near the groin area where one normally finds the femoral artery. It is overall considered to be one of the best sources for toxicology specimens, with the best blood source being the iliac vessels, which is pulled internally. The preference for both of these sources has to do with the fact that blood found further away from the heart provides more accurate readings.

As previously mentioned, suspected overdose cases tend to be negative for physical evidentiary findings both externally and internally. The answer almost always rests in the toxicology findings. And this is very much the case for Mr. McKeehan. When his toxicology results returned, it was found he had hit positive for a number of both legal and illegal drugs in his system, including fentanyl, amphetamines, and marijuana.

Brand names for amphetamines include Adderall and Dexedrine, which are the two specified in this report. Amphetamines are stimulants and are legally listed as Schedule II drugs, meaning they are heavily regulated and restricted here in the United States, and are only allotted limited medical use.

Now, here's a dirty little secret about marijuana when it comes to medical examiner cases: while it is legally a Schedule I drug on the federal level currently, meaning completely illegal -- whatever your opinions on it are aside, on a medical examiner level, knowing someone has THC in their system is a nearly useless piece of evidence. Most investigators and pathologists note it for technical purposes and move on. This, of course, doesn't include synthetic marijuana, often referred to on the street as "spice," which actually can kill you, but that would be a completely different reading for a person's tox. Regardless, Mr. McKeehan simply had natural THC in his system, which had almost nothing to do with his cause and manner of death.

And finally, that leads us to the true star of the show here: fentanyl. Like amphetamines, it is legally listed as a Schedule II drug. And though it is likewise heavily regulated as well, it is also currently one of the most widely abused drugs in the country. As we'll soon go over, it was the most lethal of the drugs found in Truett McKeehan's toxicology.

[Part Four. Opinion.]

I would be remiss if I did not go over a minor part of this report -- and I only mention it at all due to so little information being available publicly about Truett. The pathologist notes in this report that Truett had a quote/unquote "possible history" of using nitrous oxide. The only other mention of nitrous oxide in this report is that it was requested to be checked for by the toxicologist. There were no traces of it in his system, however. A request for nitrous oxide testing is a very specific request, not something most pathologists typically want or need, even if it is a suspected overdose case, nor is it something typically checked for at all. So for the pathologist to request this, there must have been some level of suspicion communicated to the investigator from either friends or family.

At the beginning of this episode I alluded to the fact that while Mr. McKeehan seemed an otherwise kind and decent young man, friends and family stopped short of giving away indications of possible addiction issues, and obviously they did that for good reasons. Most families, in fact, are normally pretty mum to the public on such details. And for the family's sake, I won't dwell on it here suffice to say that it is a solid piece of information that gives us the impression of Truett's struggles.

We also won't dwell on THC, as again, it's not a particularly useful piece of evidence.

Now, the amphetamines levels found in the blood were 48 nanograms/milliliter. Lethal levels for amphetamines start around 8600 nanograms/milliliter. Thus Truett had non-lethal levels. They're likely listed in the cause of death because mixing stimulants and depressants is simply never a good combination.

Which leads us, finally, to fentanyl. Lethal levels start at 3 nanograms/milliliter. Mr. McKeehan had 8.7 nanograms/milliliter at his time of death. Another interesting note here is that the toxicology was also positive for 4-ANPP, or despropionyl fentanyl. So as a reference here, fentanyl is available via prescriptions as it is a legally made substance. However, it is also widely illegally manufactured and sold on the street. Fentanyl sold from pharmacies does not typically contain despropionyl fentanyl. This is usually produced when it is manufactured on the street. This could be a very telling piece of evidence that Mr. McKeehan likely did not legally purchase and thus was not using a legal form of the substance. Of course, as we often like to say, that is only a theory...

Cause of death: acute combined drug intoxication (fentanyl and amphetamine).
Manner: accident. Report date: November 4th, 2019. Signed, Dr. Feng Li, M.D, J.D. Ph.D.

[Part Five. Postmortem.]

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid. Synthetic opioids, as their name implies, are not naturally occurring. They are substances created by chemists in a lab. Contrast with the former king of opioids: morphine. Morphine derived its opiate properties from the flowering plant *papaver somniferum*, more commonly known as the opium poppy plant. Without this plant, there is no formula for morphine. Fentanyl, however, has no base formula; it is not derived from a specific organism or substance. And as it is not natural, there is no “pure form” of it as some street drugs tout themselves to be. Currently it is up to 100 times stronger than morphine. And it only continues to be synthesized stronger. For reference, there is an analogue of fentanyl called carfentanil. Carfentanil is an elephant tranquilizer, and it has also been popping up on the streets more and more. It is a substance so powerful that an amount smaller than Abraham Lincoln’s head on a penny is enough to cause a lethal overdose. It is the reason many Last Responders are now required to carry Narcan, or “naloxone,” to death scenes....

But Truett McKeehan only had fentanyl, which was likely illegally manufactured. There are numerous ways to consume the drug, including pills, powders, lozenges, patches, and nasal sprays. In fact, a once popular way to consume it was to take a patch and wrap it around a lollipop, wait for the gel-like substance to stick, then pull the patch off, and the user would then suck on the lollipop. Now, of course, fentanyl lollipops are legally made and sold to pharmacies. Like candy.

Truett’s case resembles so many others in the present day. He had an addiction problem, and it’s hard to know where his mental state was. Most people who fatally overdose never expect to not wake up again. They go too far or simply do not know their limits. Or they may not know just how powerful the drug they’re taking actually is. Opioids like fentanyl sedate the body and the user simply feels

themselves drifting off to sleep. The substances continue their effects after the person has lost consciousness, and if they're strong enough, such as the case of Mr. McKeehan, they simply sedate the body, as we've gone over, to point of the lungs filling with fluid, causing labored breathing. And on top of this, the opioids also depress the neurological system, and breathing slows even more. Eventually, this all takes its toll on the heart, which slows and slows...and finally whimpers to a stop. And then it's over.

Addiction, like fentanyl, has no base formula, either. There is no straight line from one cause to another. So in a similar vein where it is hard to regulate and track fentanyl manufacturing, so too is it hard to track where exactly one was pulled into their addiction, which is why sobriety can be so hard to achieve. Again, those monsters and demons live inside all of us. That may be an odd statement to hear on a science-based show, I'm sure, but the truth is funny that way sometimes. And not always so unlike the truths we find in an autopsy....

If you know someone who is having issues, or perhaps you yourself are struggling, know that there are people out there who want to help. Friends and family are always good resources, but it is understandable if you don't feel comfortable going down those avenues. We've grown accustomed to texting and not talking these days, so if that's your comfort level, you can text the number 741741 and simply write "Hello." Someone will respond and someone will help you. If you need to talk, you can call 1-800-273-8255. There are no judgments, only listeners. And it's okay if you're not okay. So take care of yourselves, and each other.

Autopsy is an educational program. All information is culled from actual autopsy reports, and read, as written, out of respect for both the deceased, and the living who speak for them. Opinions and interpretations of these reports are solely those of the reader.

The End.