



Review Paper

Virtopsy Vs. Traditional Autopsy: A Review of Accuracy, Limitations, And Future Potential

Shakshi Tyagi¹, Ravi Aditya^{2*}

1. Department of Forensic Science, Faculty of Applied and Basic Sciences, SGT University, Gurugram, Haryana, India
2. Department of Radio-Imaging Technology, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, SGT University, Gurugram, Haryana, India

More Information

Address for Correspondence: Department of Radio-Imaging Technology, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, SGT University, Gurugram, Haryana, India

E-mail: adityaravi88@gmail.com

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Abstract

Postmortem examinations are essential for determining the cause and manner of death, with traditional autopsy long regarded as the gold standard due to its capacity for comprehensive internal examination, histology, and toxicology. However, global autopsy rates have declined because of cultural, religious, and emotional objections, as well as logistical and legal challenges. In response, virtual autopsy (Virtopsy) has emerged as a non-invasive alternative, employing advanced imaging techniques such as postmortem computed tomography (PMCT), magnetic resonance imaging (PMMRI), postmortem CT angiography (PMCTA), and 3D surface scanning.

This review synthesizes existing literature to compare Virtopsy and traditional autopsy in terms of diagnostic accuracy, limitations, and practical utility, drawing on case studies from mass disasters, burn incidents, and pediatric deaths. Findings indicate that Virtopsy excels in detecting skeletal injuries, vascular lesions, and foreign objects, offering rapid, archivable, and culturally acceptable examinations. However, it remains less effective in identifying microscopic pathology, subtle soft tissue changes, and biochemical abnormalities, necessitating complementary histological and toxicological analyses.

Future advancements, particularly through artificial intelligence (AI)-driven image analysis, hold potential to enhance diagnostic precision, automate lesion detection, and integrate multimodal forensic data. Portable imaging units and global legal standardization may further expand accessibility and admissibility. The review concludes that a hybrid approach—combining Virtopsy with targeted traditional autopsy—could optimize forensic investigations, balancing cultural sensitivity, accuracy, and efficiency.

Keywords: Virtopsy, Forensic Imaging, Postmortem CT, Traditional Autopsy, Non-invasive Autopsy, Forensic Radiology

1. Introduction

The Postmortem examinations remain a cornerstone of forensic science, offering critical insights into the cause and manner of death. Traditionally, autopsies involve invasive dissection of the body to examine internal organs and tissues. Despite their long-standing status as the gold

standard, the global rate of conventional autopsies has declined sharply in recent decades due to religious objections, emotional distress for families, legal challenges, and declining interest among medical professionals [1]. These limitations have highlighted the urgent need for less invasive, more culturally acceptable alternatives.

Advancements in medical imaging have led to the emergence of virtual autopsy (virtopsy)—a technique that combines postmortem computed tomography (PMCT), magnetic resonance imaging (PMMRI), and postmortem angiography (PMCTA) to examine the body without dissection. Virtopsy is non-invasive, digitally archivable, and more acceptable in communities where traditional autopsy is restricted [2]. It enables detailed visualization of skeletal fractures, foreign objects, hemorrhages, and air embolisms while preserving the integrity of the body [3].

Recent studies have shown that while virtopsy excels in evaluating bone injuries and vascular lesions, it still falls short in identifying certain soft tissue pathologies and microscopic changes, which require histological examination [4,5]. Despite these limitations, virtopsy has proven especially valuable in mass disaster scenarios, infectious disease outbreaks, and in pediatric or perinatal deaths where conventional autopsies are often declined [6].

The objective of this review is to compare virtopsy and traditional autopsy in terms of diagnostic accuracy, limitations, practical utility, and future potential. By examining both approaches side-by-side, this paper aims to provide a clearer understanding of their respective strengths and shortcomings, as well as explore how the integration of both methods could lead to improved forensic outcomes in diverse medico-legal contexts.

2. Brief History of Autopsy and Evolution of Virtopsy

The term "autopsy" originates from the Greek words *autos* (self) and *opsomei* (to see), signifying "to see for oneself" [7]. Historically, human dissection began in ancient civilizations like Egypt and Mesopotamia, where it was tied to mummification. In India, early surgical texts from Sushruta in the 6th century BC referenced anatomical dissection, while Greek physicians in the 3rd century BC advanced anatomical knowledge through postmortem examination [8]. Autopsy gained scientific foundation with Giovanni Morgagni's 1761 publication *The Seats and Causes of Diseases Investigated by Anatomy*, which documented nearly 700 dissections and laid the groundwork for pathological anatomy [8,9]. By the 20th century, autopsy became central to medical education and clinical diagnostics, especially under figures like William Osler. However, from the 1960s onward, global autopsy rates declined due to factors such as cultural resistance, the

emotional toll on families, risk of infection, and reduced academic emphasis [8,9].

One of the primary limitations of traditional autopsy is its invasive nature, which often conflicts with religious and cultural norms, particularly in communities like Judaism or Islam that prohibit mutilation of the dead [7]. Additionally, conventional autopsies require skilled personnel, are time-consuming, and may result in the destruction of forensic evidence [10]. In response, forensic science gradually incorporated radiological techniques, leading to the emergence of Virtopsy—a portmanteau of "virtual" and "autopsy"—which uses non-invasive imaging technologies such as postmortem computed tomography (PMCT), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and 3D surface scanning [9].

The term Virtopsy was coined by Prof. Richard Dirnhofer and further developed by Prof. Michael Thali at the Institute of Forensic Medicine, University of Bern, in the late 1990s [9,8]. Initial forensic imaging applications date back to 1977, with the use of CT to visualize gunshot injuries [10]. Since then, Virtopsy has evolved into a powerful forensic tool capable of identifying causes of death, injury patterns, and even minute pathological changes without dissecting the body. Technologies like MR microscopy, MRS, 3D photogrammetry, and robotic-guided postmortem biopsy have broadened its diagnostic reach [7].

Today, Virtopsy offers a dignified, reproducible, and archivable alternative to traditional autopsy. It is particularly valuable in legal, religious, or mass disaster contexts where conventional autopsies are not feasible. Although limitations remain—such as high cost and the need for specialized expertise—Virtopsy is increasingly seen as the future of forensic pathology [8].

3. Techniques Used in Virtopsy

3.1 Postmortem Computed Tomography (PMCT)

Postmortem Computed Tomography (PMCT) is one of the foundational imaging techniques in virtual autopsy. It uses X-ray technology to capture detailed cross-sectional images of the body, which can be reconstructed into three-dimensional models for comprehensive examination. PMCT is particularly effective in detecting fractures, gas embolisms, foreign bodies (such as bullets), and other skeletal abnormalities.

Advantages:

- Non-invasive and quick to perform
- Excellent for visualizing skeletal injuries, fractures, and air embolisms
- Useful in trauma cases such as traffic accidents and blunt force injuries
- Digital records can be stored and reviewed later

Limitations:

- PMCT is limited in detecting certain soft tissue injuries and subtle vascular pathologies
- It may not effectively differentiate between antemortem and postmortem injuries without additional techniques like angiography [4,11].

PMCT has shown high consistency with traditional autopsy findings in traumatic deaths, but its diagnostic value diminishes in cases such as sudden cardiac death unless enhanced with contrast-based imaging [4].

3.2 Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)

MRI uses strong magnetic fields and radiofrequency waves to generate detailed images of soft tissues. It plays a crucial role in virtopsy when soft tissue injuries, organ pathology, or brain trauma need to be assessed. MRI is particularly valuable in identifying cerebral hemorrhages, ischemic injuries, and cardiac pathologies.

Advantages:

- Superior soft tissue contrast resolution
- Ideal for diagnosing brain injuries, organ trauma, and myocardial infarction
- No radiation exposure
- Valuable in cases involving decomposed or partially damaged bodies

Limitations:

- More time-consuming and expensive than CT
- Not suitable for detecting gas embolism or detailed skeletal trauma
- Difficult to interpret in bodies with severe decomposition [7,11].

Despite its limitations, MRI complements PMCT by offering insights into injuries not well visualized on CT, such as myocardial infarction or soft tissue damage in the brain [11].

3.3 3D Surface Scanning

3D surface scanning is used to record the external features of the body in great detail. It generates a virtual model of the body's surface using laser or photogrammetry-based scanning, allowing for digital documentation of external injuries such as abrasions, lacerations, and contusions.

Advantages:

- Preserves external injury details digitally
- Enables repeated viewing and documentation
- Can assist in reconstructing scenes of crime or accidents
- Helps in forensic facial reconstruction or comparison

Limitations:

- Cannot provide information about internal injuries
- Requires integration with other imaging techniques for a comprehensive postmortem examination

It is particularly useful in legal documentation and facial identification when bodies are disfigured or decomposed [11].

3.4 Postmortem Computed Tomographic Angiography (PMCTA)

PMCTA involves injecting contrast media into the vascular system after death, which allows for detailed visualization of arteries and veins. It bridges the gap between traditional autopsy and PMCT by adding functional imaging of the vascular system.

Advantages:

- Detects vascular lesions like aneurysms, dissections, and thromboembolisms
- Enhances the diagnostic value of PMCT
- Particularly valuable in sudden cardiac death or hemorrhage-related cases

Limitations:

- Requires specially trained personnel and equipment
- May not always be feasible depending on postmortem interval and body condition
- Invasive to a minor extent [4,11]

When combined with PMCT, PMCTA can significantly improve the ability to diagnose cardiac and vascular causes

of death, thereby reducing the number of unexplained cases [4].

3.5 Image-Guided Biopsy

This technique involves performing a needle biopsy guided by imaging (usually CT or MRI) to obtain tissue samples from internal organs or suspicious lesions for histological examination.

Advantages:

- Minimally invasive alternative to open autopsy
- Preserves body integrity while enabling tissue diagnosis
- Useful in infection, tumor, or metabolic disease cases

Limitations:

- Limited sampling area compared to full-body dissection
- Potential to miss relevant pathology if not accurately targeted
- Requires histopathology backup and expert interpretation [11]

Image-guided biopsies provide a vital addition to virtopsy, especially in cases where cultural or religious restrictions prohibit full dissection.

4. Comparative Analysis: Virtopsy vs. Traditional Autopsy

Parameter	Virtopsy (Postmortem Imaging)	Traditional Autopsy
Diagnostic Accuracy	High accuracy for skeletal injuries, foreign body localization, air embolism, and trauma pattern analysis; less accurate for certain soft tissue, vascular injuries, or subtle pathology unless combined with PMCTA or PMMRI [12]. Can miss poisoning or some infections [13].	Gold standard for cause of death; detects soft tissue injuries, vascular pathologies, microscopic changes, toxins, infections. Can identify ~25% of clinically missed diagnoses [12].
Time-efficiency	Rapid – PMCT can be done in minutes; results can be stored, re-analyzed, and shared. Facilitates faster body release and targeted autopsy if needed [13].	More time-consuming (several hours); delays body release; requires full dissection and histology [12].
Cultural/Ethical Acceptability	High – non-invasive; acceptable to families/religions objecting to dissection; preserves body integrity [12].	Lower – invasive; may conflict with cultural/religious beliefs about body preservation [13].
Cost	Lower per case in facilities with existing imaging; avoids costs of prolonged procedures. However, high initial investment for scanners and trained staff [12].	No special imaging equipment; costs mainly in personnel and pathology labs. Recurring operational costs but no major technology investment [13].
Limitations	Limited soft tissue and vascular detail without advanced techniques; may not detect microscopic disease or subtle pathology; not legally recognized as sole method in some jurisdictions [12,13].	Irreversible—once dissection done, original state lost; potential sampling bias; biohazard risk; emotionally distressing for families [12].
Legal Acceptance	Increasingly accepted as a complementary tool; admissibility depends on jurisdiction and case type; still not universally recognized as a replacement for autopsy [12].	Universally accepted in courts as definitive method for cause-of-death determination [13].

5. Case Applications from Literature

Postmortem imaging techniques, particularly postmortem computed tomography (PMCT), have been increasingly applied in complex forensic scenarios where traditional autopsy may be challenged by body condition, cultural restrictions, or investigative priorities. Several high-profile cases demonstrate the forensic strengths and constraints of Virtopsy.

1. Burned Victims: Detection of Hidden Trauma

Henri M. de Bakker et al. performed a retrospective study of 50 burned victims in the Netherlands, each undergoing PMCT prior to autopsy. Fire-related deaths often pose difficulty in differentiating pre-fire from peri-fire injuries. PMCT proved invaluable in detecting skeletal heat fractures, the “split diploë sign” in cranial bones, dural ruptures, pneumothorax, pleural effusions, and concealed foreign bodies such as bullets or implants. In many cases, such findings were obscured at autopsy due to extensive charring. However, PMCT could not assess airway soot deposition, carboxyhemoglobin levels, or subtle soft tissue burns — factors crucial to determining vitality during the fire. This limitation reinforced its complementary role alongside conventional autopsy [14].

2. Natural Disasters: Mass Casualty Management

Cristina Mondello et al. applied PMCT to 43 victims from two major natural disasters in Sicily — a 2009 landslide/flood and a 2018 flood. Victims included children and adults with extensive polytrauma, amputations, and asphyxial deaths. PMCT provided rapid and precise characterization of traumatic injuries and localized obstructive debris within bronchial branches, enabling clear differentiation between traumatic shock, compression asphyxia, and airway obstruction. In mass fatality settings, PMCT expedited examinations, documented injuries, and allowed cause-of-death determinations when full autopsy capacity was limited [15].

3. Terrorist Attacks: The Paris 2015 Case

Following the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, in which 130 people were killed across multiple locations, French forensic authorities implemented large-scale PMCT scanning for 49 victims [16]. The primary aims were to localize bullets, identify explosive-related fragments, and

document ballistic trajectories. PMCT allowed non-invasive identification of projectile paths and injury patterns before autopsy, which was vital in coordinating ballistic evidence collection. In some cases, minimal invasive procedures were performed instead of full autopsies, preserving body integrity for cultural reasons. PMCT also helped triage cases, prioritizing those needing urgent forensic examination. This event underscored Virtopsy’s role in disaster victim identification (DVI) and as a secure, archivable form of injury documentation [16].

4. Military Aviation Disaster: NATO Helicopter Crash

In a NATO helicopter crash investigation, PMCT was applied to assess multiple crew fatalities. Imaging allowed identification of complex fracture patterns, dismemberment injuries, and metallic fragments from the aircraft fuselage embedded within tissues. This non-invasive documentation was crucial for both cause-of-death certification and accident reconstruction. PMCT detected internal trauma patterns consistent with high-energy deceleration and rotational forces, supporting mechanical failure hypotheses. Additionally, imaging facilitated partial identification of remains where conventional visual recognition was impossible due to fragmentation.

5. Pediatric and Sensitive Cases

PMCT is particularly valuable in suspected child abuse cases, offering detailed skeletal and intracranial injury visualization without invasive procedures. This minimizes distress for families while preserving evidentiary integrity. The literature within these case studies aligns with broader pediatric forensic findings — PMCT can reveal occult fractures and hemorrhages, enhancing detection rates while avoiding full dissection when culturally or emotionally unacceptable [15,16].

Forensic Utility and Limitations

Across these diverse scenarios — from burned victims to terrorism and natural disasters — Virtopsy has shown:

- Non-invasive preservation of remains in culturally sensitive contexts.
- Rapid acquisition and storage of high-resolution, reviewable images.
- Precise trauma mapping, especially in burned, fragmented, or decomposed remains.

- Guidance for targeted autopsy to improve efficiency.

Limitations include inability to detect microscopic pathology, certain vascular injuries, or biochemical markers of intoxication. Integration with selective autopsy, histology, and toxicology remains essential [14-16].

6. Limitations and Challenges

Despite its growing application, Virtopsy faces several limitations that currently prevent it from fully replacing the traditional autopsy.

1. Resolution Limits and Soft Tissue Differentiation

Postmortem computed tomography (PMCT) provides excellent skeletal detail but has limitations in differentiating soft tissue structures, particularly in cases of natural deaths where subtle organ changes or vascular lesions are involved [17]. Magnetic resonance imaging (PMMRI) offers superior soft tissue resolution but is time-consuming, costly, and not widely available in forensic facilities [18]. Even with postmortem CT angiography (PMCTA), certain microvascular pathologies or early ischemic changes may go undetected [19].

2. Inability to Detect Microscopic Features

Unlike traditional autopsy, Virtopsy cannot directly detect histological or microbiological changes, nor can it identify toxins without invasive sampling. The absence of direct tissue analysis means conditions like infections, metabolic disorders, and poisoning may remain undiagnosed unless complemented by postmortem biopsies or laboratory testing [20]. This lack of microscopic assessment is a key barrier to replacing conventional autopsy [21].

3. Equipment Cost and Accessibility

The infrastructure for Virtopsy—multi-slice CT scanners, MRI units, and image processing software—requires substantial investment. Costs include not only procurement and installation but also maintenance and specialized staffing [19]. Many regions, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, lack access to such facilities, limiting widespread adoption.

4. Legal Admissibility and Acceptance

While Virtopsy is increasingly accepted in some jurisdictions, it is still often regarded as a complementary tool rather than a replacement for traditional autopsy. Courts generally demand physical dissection findings as the gold standard for cause-of-death certification. Without uniform legal recognition, the sole use of Virtopsy may be challenged in judicial proceedings [20].

5. Learning Curve and Interpretation Variability

Radiological interpretation of postmortem images requires specialized forensic radiology expertise. A lack of trained personnel and standardized protocols can lead to inter-observer variability and diagnostic discrepancies [22]. Moreover, interpreting postmortem changes such as gas formation or fluid shifts can be challenging without correlating with conventional autopsy findings.

7. Future Potential of Virtopsy and AI Integration

The future of Virtopsy is closely tied to advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), particularly in image analysis and forensic diagnostics. AI-powered algorithms, including deep learning and convolutional neural networks, have demonstrated remarkable potential in enhancing the precision and efficiency of postmortem imaging. These systems can automatically detect fractures, hemorrhages, and pathological changes in CT and MRI scans, reducing reliance on subjective human interpretation and accelerating case turnaround times [23]. Deep learning can also facilitate automated organ segmentation, pattern recognition in injury morphology, and identification of subtle anomalies that may be overlooked in manual reviews [23].

One promising direction is the integration of Virtopsy with AI-based decision support tools that combine radiological findings with toxicology, histopathology, and crime scene data to produce comprehensive forensic reports. Such multimodal systems could improve diagnostic accuracy, standardize interpretations, and enhance reproducibility in court-admissible evidence [19].

Portable Virtopsy units represent another future frontier, enabling on-site forensic imaging in remote locations, disaster zones, or conflict areas. Mobile CT or MRI units equipped with AI-driven analysis could facilitate rapid victim identification, trauma assessment, and cause-of-death determination without transporting bodies over long

distances. This capability could be crucial in mass disaster scenarios where time and logistics are critical [24].

Global legal standardization will also play a decisive role in the future adoption of Virtopsy. While some jurisdictions already accept postmortem imaging findings in court, the absence of uniform guidelines limits widespread implementation. Establishing internationally recognized protocols for image acquisition, interpretation, and reporting—supported by AI-generated audit trails—would strengthen the legal standing of Virtopsy evidence and promote cross-border collaboration in forensic investigations [19].

8. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Virtopsy and traditional autopsy demonstrates that each method offers unique strengths in forensic investigation. Traditional autopsy continues to be the gold standard, providing unparalleled access to soft tissue pathology, histology, toxicology, and microbiological studies. Its ability to detect subtle, microscopic, or biochemical changes ensures comprehensive cause-of-death determination and universal legal acceptance in judicial proceedings. However, its invasive nature, cultural and religious objections, time demands, and associated emotional impact on families have contributed to a global decline in its use.

Virtopsy addresses several of these challenges through its non-invasive, digitally archivable, and culturally acceptable approach. It has proven particularly advantageous in detecting skeletal trauma, foreign body localization, and vascular pathologies when enhanced with PMCTA. Its application in mass disasters, pediatric fatalities, and sensitive cultural contexts highlights its adaptability and humanitarian value. Yet, its limitations—such as reduced soft tissue resolution, inability to assess microscopic pathology, high equipment costs, and incomplete legal standardization—mean that it cannot yet function as a complete replacement for traditional autopsy.

The future of forensic pathology may lie in an integrated, hybrid model that strategically combines Virtopsy with targeted dissection, guided biopsies, and advanced AI-based image analysis. Such integration could improve diagnostic precision, reduce examination time, and preserve body integrity while ensuring compliance with legal and cultural frameworks. By embracing both innovation and tradition,

forensic science can move toward a more efficient, accurate, and socially acceptable model of postmortem investigation.

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