

Anatomy of a murder

How Cleveland police is teaching officers about murder investigations by getting them to watch DVDs. John Dean reports

They are the most complex of investigations which test the abilities of all officers involved. Major murder inquiries can be particularly bewildering, especially for officers who are young in service and are involved in a homicide investigation for the first time in their careers.

What makes the situation even more testing for them is the pressure in those early hours of an inquiry, in which every detective knows the chances of an arrest are at their highest. At a time when they have much to organise, senior officers simply do not have time to sit down and explain procedures to novices.

Now, Cleveland Police has come up with a solution by making two DVDs which explain the demands of an inquiry. They introduce some of the procedures and terminology officers will encounter and explain how the major incident room operates.

The DVD includes every step of the murder inquiry, including how the initial call to the police is handled and what protocols need to be followed when it is taken, it features shots showing how the scene is secured and the steps that officers need to take once they arrive at a scene so that it is not compromised. It also shows the work of the Scenes of Crime Officers (SOCOs), what they are looking for at a scene and why it is important that even the apparently most insignificant item needs to be preserved.

The force's Murder Investigation Team (MIT), which is based at headquarters in Ladgate Lane, Middlesbrough, came up with the idea for the DVDs. Set up in 2004, MIT handles the force's major homicide inquiries, those where it is offender unknown, and serious crimes such as kidnaps.

Its officers also advise local colleagues on straightforward murder investigations such as domestic incidents where the perpetrator is apprehended immediately.

Over the years, MIT's senior officers have dealt with some of the North-

East's biggest murder investigations, including child killings, and amassed a vast amount of experience out of which emerged the idea for the DVDs. MIT's head Det Supt Tony Hutchinson said: "We identified that there was a lack of awareness about how a major incident room works. We also identified that some officers, particularly the younger ones, did not know some of the terminology that we use in murder inquiries and did not know where they fitted in with the inquiry. The idea of the DVDs, which came in a flash of inspiration, is to answer their questions."

Among those officers working on the project were Det Supt Hutchinson and fellow MIT members Det Insp Andy Greenwood, Det Sgt Iain Henderson and DCs Jim McArthur, Paul Hook and Julie Taylor. Also taking part were two retired officers from other forces, Tony Rogers and Dennis McGookin.

The DVDs are now being shown to officers who join the MIT team as a major inquiry is beginning.

"In the early hours of a murder investigation there is a lot to do. Previously, you had to find time for a detective sergeant to explain to the other officers what was happening and what was expected of them.

"Using the DVDs, you can get that message over. Another advantage is that it is the same message every time, there is no room for human variation.

"The DVDs are particularly aimed at young investigators who might not have experienced a homicide investigation before. It is Janet and John stuff but we have all been in Janet and John situations at some time. Even some experienced officers find watching the DVDs useful because they serve as a reminder," explains Det Supt Hutchinson.

Det Supt Hutchinson says he still remembers his first murder inquiry, an investigation into the killing of a man in Middlesbrough in 1982.

"I remember people talking about actions and other terms with which I was not familiar. They were using terminology I had not heard before

Example of advice given in the murder inquiry DVD:

One example given in the DVD highlights the structure when the force receives the first call reporting a murder. This would automatically be handed to MIT, whose management will assess what action is required. It might be that local officers can deal with the incident - ie, in cases where the offender is known and can be quickly apprehended. Or the decision might be to use MIT officers in more complex inquiries where the offender is not known.

Whichever decision is made, a crime scene manager is appointed and will run the inquiry, select the team required, direct the officers and call in and liaise with the Scenes of Crimes Officer (SOCO).

and I was also not totally sure what was expected of me."

However, the DVDs are not reserved just for murder officers because Cleveland Police is now using it as a training aid across the force. Among those being shown the films are probationers studying on the course run as a joint project between the force and the University of Teesside, in Middlesbrough.

More seasoned officers are being shown it as well. Det Supt Hutchinson said: "It is not just useful for detectives. It is useful, for example, for the PC who is standing at the edge of the cordon, guarding the scene, and it is useful for search teams so they know how we want them to work. It is also useful for uniform inspectors who are on the scene before we get there."

Det Insp Greenwood is among those who can see the value of the project. He said: "At the outset of an inquiry, there is a lot to do but there does come a time when there is a lull for

half an hour or so. That is when we can show the DVDs and by having a corporate approach, we can ensure everyone gets the same message.

"We are showing it to everybody across the force and we will show it on every inquiry so some officers will see it four or five times. Each time they see it, they pick up on something else. "The DVDs do not take long to watch and they help to focus and re-focus officers minds on what needs to be done. It is a useful reminder.

Det Con Paul Hook, a police officer for 28 years, whose particular role in the work was to detail procedures for recording exhibits accurately, said: "I can recall my first murder case when they were using terms I did not know and you sit there, wondering 'should I ask and make myself look stupid?'"

"The DVDs explain everything officers on a major murder inquiry would need to know. They serve as a good reminder for officers. They can also be useful for district detectives who maybe have three or four years experience in CID and ten to 15 years in the service but who may still not know what is involved in a major incident when it is unknown offender."

Det Con Jim McArthur, whose input specialised particularly on procedures for the disclosures of material, said:

"MIT is a small team that pulls together pretty quickly and clicks into gear but we do bring in other officers and they can have a mixture of experience, including those who have been involved in a murder inquiry before, those who have not been involved in one for a while and those with a lot of experience.

"In the early stages of an inquiry, there is a need for something that either explains what is going to happen or acts as a refresher. We did not want something like a training aid, we wanted something that was short, snappy and impactful and focused on what we are going to do." And the idea is attracting interest. Det Supt Hutchinson said: "We have already been contacted by other forces interesting in obtaining copies."