

FUNERAL SERVICE *times*

THE INDEPENDENT VOICE OF THE FUNERAL PROFESSION

NOVEMBER 2010

ESTABLISHED 2006

WWW.FUNERALSERVICETIMES.CO.UK

Parisian splendour

A tour of Père Lachaise Cemetery

Cultural change

The increase in pauper burials

A hidden science

The crucial work being undertaken by pathologists to help us better understand both life and death



Hearse and verse

Choosing appropriate poetry for use in the funeral services of those with no close relatives or friends





THE HIDDEN
SCIENCE

Pathology is a much misunderstood area of science, but is crucial to our understanding of both life and death, as **JENNIFER HACKER** explains

When you hear the word pathology what instantly springs to mind? I knew that it had something to do with post mortems and research into diseases, but I must confess I was shamefully ignorant.

When I was in my first few weeks of training, I shadowed my colleagues who collected bodies from the hospital, and I had a basic scan of the morgue. Lack of time meant a fleeting visit and no real opportunity to ask questions in such a busy and solemn environment, although plenty were on the tip of my tongue. Since then, however, I have learnt just how important the science of pathology is, and those who practice it have an amazing responsibility to progress in the research of why we die, and to improve medicine for the living.

For me there seems to be an identity crisis for this intriguing branch of medicine. The Royal College of Pathologists themselves call it the 'hidden science', and I am inclined to agree. Our obsession with crime thrillers – both home grown and imported – continues the same gritty stereotypes. On one side we have detectives walking through dim empty corridors to find white-coated professionals with bow ties and haughty attitudes, barking into a hanging microphone. On the other is the glamorous woman in a man's world; soft focus cameras follow her extracting a brain with one hand while putting on her Jimmy Choos with the other.

The reality of pathology and the part it plays after death is just an aspect of an ever-expanding specialism. Those involved are passionate about what they do; death may be a central focus of the research, but the underlying meaning is what it means to life, and the quality of it for all of us.

Coroners versus hospitals

We come across both coroners and hospitals in our careers, but the majority will be hospital post mortems. These are requested by the doctor to answer a specific question. For example, if a patient has a heart attack and passes away, was it due to high blood pressure or a blood clot travelling there from another part of the body? Maybe they are piloting a new drug and would like the answer as to why it did, or did not work? Questions like these can be answered through the post mortem (PM) process, and by gaining this understanding, medical concerns can be brought to light and explanations regarding cause of death can be provided to the family. Medicine benefits from the knowledge gained through such cases, and new pathologists can be trained. Families can refuse this request from the doctor – they may be satisfied that the heart attack was what killed the individual, and do not want their loved one 'messed about with'.

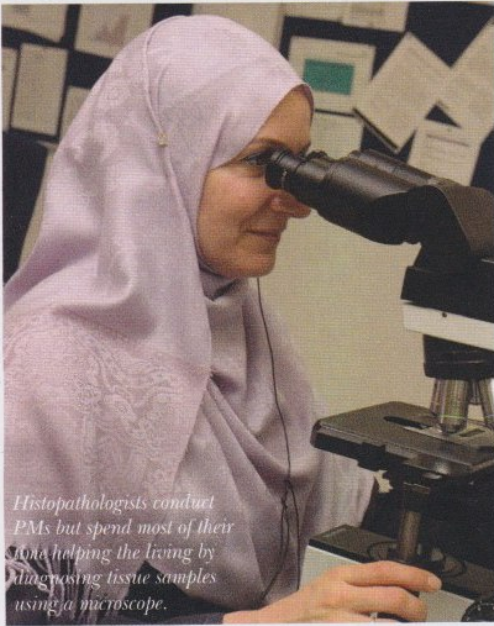
It seems as if the ghost of Alder Hey still lingers in the public consciousness, but as the final set of remains were buried in January of this year, those in the profession hope this will close a very sad chapter. Now

a decade has passed, and the time has come to move on. The lessons learned through history have resulted in procedures being changed to ensure standards in pathology are now the highest they can be. But despite the utmost care and compassion, hospital PMs are on the decline, and so too the opportunities to train a new generation.

There are other reasons that could contribute to the decline. Supervised training of pathologists means that PMs will take longer to conduct – not only the time involved in the PM itself, but the myriad of paperwork that goes with it. There will always be an underlying pressure for a result when there is a grieving family



Events run by the Royal College of Pathologists to engage with the public about the importance of autopsies.



Histopathologists conduct PMs but spend most of their time helping the living by diagnosing tissue samples using a microscope.

waiting for the release of a body, so the timing issue is a central concern. Training in medicine as we know takes years, and with a science like this the results could change lives. There is, as always, a financial aspect; histology tests (blood and tissue analysis) may be required and this costs time and money for the NHS Trust. Without such tests a family may not know about genetic or blood diseases that run in the family.

The sadness is that so much knowledge will be lost when the experienced pathologists retire, and the problem is compounded by the lack of new starters to whom this knowledge can be imparted. There is an argument that advances in technology will go some way to rebalance this, but as with our profession there is nothing better than hands-on experience with those in the know.



Dr Suzy Lishman, consultant histopathologist and lead at her hospital mortuary in Peterborough.

Doctors themselves may feel that they have the right diagnosis, and it does not occur to them to confirm it with any further tests or investigations. We are constantly told about the pressures in our healthcare system; maybe those who do want to make sure have the pressure of a decreasing budget over their heads and decide not to – another opportunity for research and training sadly missed.

So what is the profession doing to change the way pathology is seen and viewed by the public? National Pathology Week is now in its third successful year, and has events running at hospitals up and down the country. From the 1 to 7 November, hospitals are opening their doors for a rare opportunity to see pathology in its many forms in action. From terrible teratomas in Cardiff to virtual autopsies in Belfast, there will be something going on to enhance knowledge. It is a great way to get involved in the many aspects of pathology, and the chance to ask questions and learn something new. By the time this issue of *Funeral Service Times* is published, the week will already have begun, so you must act quickly if you wish to take advantage of the opportunities available. Log on to the website below and find out what is going on in your local region – there is bound to be something that will enhance your skill base.

Many thanks to Ruth Semple at the RCPATH and Dr Paola Domizio, Professor of Pathology Education at Barts and The London, for their knowledge and support in writing this article. Pictures courtesy of the Royal College of Pathologists.

INFORMATION

National Pathology Week:

www.nationalpathologyweek.org

The Royal College of Pathologists: www.rcpath.org

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