

During my internship over the fall of 2007 I learned very interesting things at the Medical Examiner Office. When I first began, my medical knowledge, though still lacking, was not near what it is right now. I not only learned a great deal medically, but I also learned a great deal more on the criminal justice side with investigations, and how the two sciences are brought together.

Each morning all the staff would gather around for the morning meeting. During this time, if anyone had any questions or concerns this was the time to voice them. The meetings were also held in order to go over what cases were coming in that day. We would talk amongst each other and figure out medically and legally if the Medical Examiner Office had jurisdiction over the case or not. If we decided the case was in our jurisdiction, there were a few things we would have to do. First, all known medical records would have to be obtained, including any recent x-rays. Then we would call EMS and get their report, and then we would call the police department who responded to the death and obtain the report on their investigation.

Once we had the body in the morgue, we had to fingerprint the decedent, and then inventory all the belonging they came in with. This includes any clothing they are wearing, any money or paraphernalia in their wallets, and also any jewelry they may have. Once this was done we would take clothed photos and nude photos, of the front and back of the decedent. Then we would take a face shot once the decedent was cleaned of any blood, dirt, etc...

Next, it would be time for the external exam. Doc would come in and fill out a body gram to record any markings on the body, both front and back. Everything about the decedent

is recorded from the weight and height to what condition the teeth are in and what tattoos, piercings and nail polish they have on.

After the external exam is done, the autopsy begins. Doc makes a "Y" shaped incision beginning at the shoulders and ending at the pubic region. The ribs and clavicle are then cut, usually with garden shears in order to gain access to major organs. Once the chest is open, the first organ to be cut out is the heart, followed by the left and right lungs, then the liver, the spleen, and the left and right kidneys. The skull is then cut open and the brain is taken out. All the organs are then weighed and dissected to see if there is anything abnormal going on in any of the organs. Blood, vitreous, urine and bile are also taken. And it is also noted whether or not the decedent has an appendix.

Once the autopsy is completed, the remains are placed in a hazard bag and placed back into the now empty chest cavity. Then the chest and head are sewn back together.

The funeral home is now ready to be called and told the decedent is ready for pick-up. But the funeral home could not pick them up without consent from the next of kin. Next of kin is very important and goes in a certain order. A spouse is the first to have rights to be next of kin. If there is no spouse, we look for any adult children. If there are no adult children, we look for living parents, then basically whomever is willing to pay for the decedent to be buried, or else the body will be considered unclaimed.

While interning I was able to go to a few crime scenes. The Medical Examiner goes to crime scenes where there is a death, just as police do. One such scene that I went to was a hanging. And from this hanging I learned how the ligature marks will differ in placement and in

how they look from a hanging to strangulation. I was also able to go to the scene of a car accident where there were two fatalities. Although people always hear about how seat belts can save lives, no one ever really gets to see what I got to see, just what a difference it would have made. No seat belts were worn, they were ejected and the injuries they sustained from being ejected were what killed them. I then got to go to the scene of a gunshot wound to the head. Although the scene did not show me much, except it was fresh and the gurgling of blood in the lungs was neat, I did get to see how the bullet tore through the brain during autopsy.

I definitely enjoyed going to the scenes the most, but I know I learned the most during an autopsy. I was able to see how a body could be absolutely fine on the outside after a car accident, but on the inside the lungs were shredded, the spleen was in two and most of the ribs were broken. Again, no seat belt was worn and the force of the organs moving away from the spine caused them to split and the ribs tore the lungs.

I also got to see a case where a decedent committed suicide with a gun, but during autopsy we noticed the arteries to the heart were severely blocked, and it seemed like a heart attack was bound to happen at any moment if he had lived.

Another thing I found interesting were whenever we had decoms where an autopsy was still an option, the brain was sometimes a complete liquid.

One thing I did notice as cases came in was that most autopsies were performed on males and most of the deaths where autopsies were performed were due to suicide.

Autopsies and scenes were not the only things I did. I also learned how to do declined/reported cases. Anytime someone dies at hospice or in a hospital and there is a known reason, and a doctor to sign the death certificate, all we have to do is enter their information into the computer. So every day we would get reports of people who died, and I would place them in the system. I also organized and scanned into the computer hundreds of photos from 1970 to present day on almost every case the Medical Examiner Office has had. 1989 seemed like a pretty bad year, with many homicides. I would also check through decedents files making sure all the information was correct and file their folders away.

The Medical Examiner Office also completes the final death certificate which is usually sent off with the funeral home when the body is picked up.

I also helped make and organize a manual that contains all the statutes one may ever want or need to know about rules, regulations, laws and policies dealing with the Medical Examiner in the state of Florida. I helped move the offices around numerous times as well, I vacuumed, I washed dishes, and I put up and decorated the Christmas tree. Oh, the joys of interning! I really did enjoy my time interning with the Medical Examiner Office though. All the investigators, Christina, Crissie and Shelby, as well as Karen were more than willing to help me when I had a question about something, and Doc was always giving me new and interesting information to read as well as teaching me so much during autopsies. They were also very easy to get along with and very relaxed. It was a great atmosphere to work in. I just wish I had more time and I also wish I could have gone on a few more scenes with them.