



Current position:

Director and Chief Medical Examiner, Miami-Dade County Medical Examiner Department

Education history:

Undergraduate & Medical Education: University of Saskatchewan

Residency Program: University of British Columbia (one year), and University of Saskatchewan

Fellowship: Miami-Dade County Medical Examiner Department

Other: University of Leeds as a Junior Lecturer for one year after my first year in residency

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR ASPIRING FORENSIC PATHOLOGISTS, INCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS TO MATCH INTO A PATHOLOGY RESIDENCY PROGRAM AND ACCEPTANCE INTO A FORENSIC PATHOLOGY FELLOWSHIP?

Medical school and a pathology residency are prerequisites to acceptance into an accredited forensic pathology Fellowship. Every program has its strengths and offers different advantages, but the year is what you make it. Take the opportunity to do complex cases in the nurturing environment of a Fellowship where you have supervision, guidance and constructive feedback. Visit scenes of death – it is a learning experience regardless of the type of case. Be attentive to detail; a little OCD is a positive trait in forensic pathology. Every office has great material regardless of its size – interesting circumstances and anatomical/pathological findings are not limited to metropolitan centers. The Fellowship you choose should synchronize with your personal life so that those twelve months feel like “just yesterday” rather than an eternity. Ultimately, certification in Forensic Pathology by the American Board of Pathology is the ticket to your career.

WHAT IS THE MOST REWARDING ASPECT OF BEING A FORENSIC PATHOLOGIST?

I am living my dream job as a forensic pathologist practicing as a medical examiner. The most important element has been, and continues to be, the Miami-Dade County Medical Examiner employees who love their jobs and create the positive working atmosphere of the office. Responding to scenes, working with Detectives and Crime Scene Investigators,

conducting autopsies, explaining cause of death to families whose first language is not English, teaching forensic pathology to attorneys, judges and jurors, lecturing to law enforcement, consulting on living victims, doing reenactments, occasionally giving free advice to private attorneys, and constantly learning in the process are fringe benefits. I am proud and humbled that so many former Fellows have achieved Chief and Deputy Chief positions, distinguished academic appointments and successful private enterprises throughout the U.S. and abroad, the most recent of which was a Deputy Chief position two days ago. Congratulations to you all!

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST MEMORABLE CASE AND WHY?

Valujet Flight 592 crashed into the Everglades on Saturday, May 11, 1996. Dr. Mittleman and I went to the scene the next morning, on Mother's Day, riding out on a small airboat to the crash site, surrounded by unnatural silence because the animals and birds in the vicinity had been killed by the crash. It was sobering to see personal effects from luggage strewn over the water, including pages from children's books. The Miami-Dade Police sectioned off quadrants of the twenty-acre crash site and organized police search teams dressed in chest waders and with gaffs and nets in hand to recover body parts. No intact heads were found but there was a nose, a partial maxilla/upper alveolar ridge, a uterine cervix, numerous hands and feet (and portions thereof), and the largest body part, a hindquarter still in a pant leg. As the weeks passed, hands and feet were replaced by pieces of skin and bone. Those seven weeks during the recovery operation were the most foul-smelling in memory around the morgue. Superimposed on the essence of decomposition (Eau de Comp) was the strong odor of jet fuel and the added stench of bodies having been in the swamp water. We discovered that adipocere (especially pungent) can form within a couple of weeks, earlier than what textbooks say. Towards the end of the recovery operation, a memorial service was held, and wreaths and a teddy bear were taken by airboat out to the crash site, giving closure to families who held vigil from the road. The floral memorial floating in the water was a reminder to those of us who continued to work the scene that 110 passengers and crew died.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST UNEXPECTED FINDING YOU HAVE ENCOUNTERED DURING A CASE?

Years ago, a young man asked rhetorically if we had ever found anything implanted by aliens. I confess that I do like finding foreign objects inside bodies. Subcutaneous beads on the penis are not rare in Miami; the largest number I have seen on one penis is eight. Penile skin heals amazingly well, and scars are rarely visible. Within the past seven months, my unexpected findings included: fine needles broken off in the scarred subcutaneous tissue in both upper arms of a chronic IM drug abuser; several pen tops in the vagina of an elderly woman; a cylindrical device reminiscent of a little satellite that was a leadless pacemaker tethered by endocardial fibrosis to the medial wall of the right ventricular apex; a saline-filled blue sphere (diameter of 10.5 centimeters and weight of 660 grams) rolling around in the stomach, that was an intragastric balloon to promote

weight loss by occupying space and decreasing gastric emptying time. Unexpected findings at scenes are another story...

WHO IS YOUR ROLE MODEL AND WHY?

The staff medical examiners during my Fellowship are my role models. They were the legendary Dr. Joseph H. Davis, Dr. Charles (Chuck) Wetli, Dr. Roger Mittleman, Dr. Valerie Rao, Dr. Jay Barnhart and the young Dr. Bruce Hyma who would become the second longest-serving Chief Medical Examiner in Miami-Dade County (1991-2016). Their collective enthusiasm for both academic and practical aspects, sense of humor, knowledge, experience, and dedication to forensic pathology made it a joy to come to the office for the four of us Fellows. I remember complaining to Dr. Wetli once about the monthly schedule – he laughed and said one of the staff medical examiners had complained about the same thing, being short-changed in the number of scene call days. The exhilarating scenes, interactions with each other and professional relationships with the Homicide Detectives and Assistant State Attorneys made the work fun, educational and inherently motivating with occasional days extending into nights, and absolutely the perfect way to begin a forensic pathology career.