

Kathryn Pinneri, MD



Current position:

Director, Montgomery County Forensic Services

Education history:

Undergraduate Education: Louisiana Tech University

Medical School: University of Texas Southwestern Medical School at Dallas

Residency Program: University of Tennessee Medical Center at Knoxville

Fellowship: Southwestern Institute of Forensic Sciences, Dallas, TX

HOW DID YOU INITIALLY BECOME INTERESTED IN FORENSIC PATHOLOGY?

After college I became a certified nuclear medicine technologist. While I enjoyed the work, I knew it wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I stumbled upon the book "Coroner" by Dr. Tom Noguchi. I thought it was fascinating and I knew it was what I wanted to do. Thankfully, I had all the credits I needed for medical school, so I took the MCAT and off I went. Best decision EVER!

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?

My advice for aspiring forensic pathologists is to become a good pathologist first. My hardest cases have had some unusual microscopic finding and I'm glad I have a solid pathology foundation to work from. It's a long journey, but worth it in the end. For pathology residency, I wanted to pick a location where I wanted to live for 5 years (it was a five-year program when I went through it) and I love anthropology, so the Knoxville program was perfect for me. Your fellowship year will be tough... there is so much to learn! I'm still learning, and I've been doing this for 20 years now. My #1 professional advice I give to people in this field is "if you think about it, you should do it". It's much easier to explain why you did something than why you didn't.

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

Providing answers to grieving family members. Even if they aren't the answers they want or expect, having an answer can help with the healing process after the loss of their loved one.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES/CHALLENGES OF FORENSIC PATHOLOGY TODAY?

A declining workforce in the setting of increasing caseloads is the biggest challenge we are facing right now. NAME is putting a lot of effort into the workforce issue with grass-roots outreach in medical schools, colleges and even high schools. No one else is going to recruit for us, so we have to do it ourselves. We won't see the fruits of our labors for several years, but we are making progress.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST MEMORABLE CASE AND WHY?

My most memorable case happened during my training. A man with schizophrenia ended up with a 6-inch metal blade spatula sticking out of his mouth. The end of the 8-inch handle was by his scapula. He perforated blood vessels in the posterior pharynx and aspirated a lot of blood. I still have no idea how that spatula got shoved that far down. The x-ray was quite remarkable!

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

The most recent unexpected finding that comes to mind would have to be a plastic dipping sauce container in the upper larynx. The container completely obstructed the airway. And yes, they were intoxicated at the time. We see unexpected stuff all the time, though, which is why I love this job so much!

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT WORKING WITH YOUR TEAM?

I am very fortunate to have a wonderful group of people to work with. We have a very small office (both in number of people and space in the current building), so it has a kind of a "family" atmosphere. We are very competitive with the county contests for pumpkin carving, Halloween costumes, Christmas tree and stocking decorating and work together as a group to come up with ideas and execute them for each contest. We try to promote a light atmosphere and support each other through the emotionally and physically difficult cases. Laughter is important. We play pranks on each other from time to time (my office was recently 'infested' with fake cockroaches....). Having a good work environment is important for this job.

WHO IS YOUR ROLE MODEL AND WHY?

I have different role models for different aspects of my life. My husband is the biggest role model in my personal life. He is one of the most selfless, giving and understanding people I've ever known. My successes and achievements were made possible with him by my side. He's my sounding board and gives me great advice. Something he said to me many, many years ago that I think about regularly is: Don't compare your insides to other people's outsides. I think this is especially important advice in today's society.

My pathology role model is Dr. John Neff, the pathology director at my residency program. He was full of life, always excited about pathology, loved forensics and was a true Renaissance man. He was so encouraging and approached everything with a child-like wonder. Somehow, he even made me like renal pathology and blood bank! He never said anything negative about forensic pathology and valued our role as pathologists.

I have so many forensic pathology role models - I really couldn't pick one. I am grateful for the trailblazers in our field... I know it was an uphill battle in the beginning, and in some ways, it still is, but I wouldn't be doing this job if it weren't for those who came before me. I am equally grateful for those coming along after me, for you will carry forensic pathology into the future. I look forward to seeing this transition as I lounge on a deck overlooking something scenic with my husband and dog next to me. :)

WHAT ARE YOUR HOBBIES AND HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN A WORK-LIFE BALANCE?

I love being outside - especially walking my dog or inline skating. We have really awesome walk/bike trails around my neighborhood and a long skate helps clear my head. For the past 10+ years I was a soccer mom, and for the past 3 years I've been a band mom, so my kid's activities also keep me busy. I'm an avid reader (fiction mostly) and I love getting book ideas from people. My most recent reads were: The Rose Code (by Kate Quinn), Golden Girl (by Elin Hilderbrand) and Chain of Iron (by Cassandra Clare, part of the Shadowhunter series). If I'm being honest, my work-life balance isn't as balanced as I'd like it, weighing more heavily on the work side right now. The past few years have been pretty brutal for most of us. I think it's important to find something that gives you peace and comfort each day - even if it's just a short walk or a cuddle with the dog. I recently started gardening, but last year I only had success with cherry tomatoes and jalapenos. Hoping to do better this year!

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE WORK SOUNDTRACK AND WHY?

I have an 80's alternative, indie/folk music soul, but I really love almost all music. We listen to a variety of things in our morgue. Streaming music is so much better than having to bring in a stack of CD's each day! We can pick a genre and hear different artists/songs all day long and it exposes me to new music which is wonderful.

WHAT IS YOUR MOST-LIKED MEAL AT YOUR FAVORITE LOCAL RESTAURANT?

Tex/Mex is a staple for our family. We have amazing restaurants in the Houston area, so we try lots of new things when we eat out. I also love to cook, so we eat at home a lot.