



## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

### Forensic Pathologist

#### **What is a pathologist?**

A pathologist is a specialized type of physician who studies a vast variety of natural diseases and works in a hospital, a laboratory, or a private setting. There are two main types of pathology – anatomic and clinical. Anatomic pathology encompasses surgical pathology, autopsy pathology, and diagnostic cytology. The surgical pathologist examines organs and tissues for the purpose of making a diagnosis to assist the primary physician caring for the patient. **Clinical pathology** includes the various laboratory departments such as hematology, microbiology, immunology, clinical chemistry, toxicology and transfusion medicine (the blood bank).

#### **What is a forensic pathologist?**

Forensic pathology is a specialized area of pathology. The forensic pathologist performs autopsies to determine the cause and manner of death in situations falling under the jurisdiction of the local medical examiner or coroner. These situations include, however are not limited to, violent deaths, sudden and unexpected deaths, deaths in children and infants, prisoners, persons under the care of institution, situations where drugs or alcohol may have contributed to the death, deaths occurring during or in close proximity to a surgical procedure, deaths in individuals not under the care of a physician or when the private physician is unable or unwilling to certify the death certificate, and deaths when there is suspicion of a public health threat. Many persons fail to realize that approximately half of the deaths examined by the forensic pathologist are natural deaths occurring in the absence of injury. The forensic pathologist is also an expert witness in the court of law, testifying in a variety of civil and criminal cases involving death or injury.

A forensic pathologist may be employed as a coroner or medical examiner or may work as an independent consultant. The statutory definitions of a coroner or medical examiner vary per state. In Minnesota, a medical examiner must be a forensic pathologist. A coroner can be a physician of any specialty.

A typical day begins with case review of the death reports and scheduling the autopsies for the day. Autopsies are performed throughout the day depending on caseload. Paperwork and phone calls fill the remaining hours. Generally, it is a normal workday schedule, however requires weekend and holiday coverage. After hour/weekend call is

required for consults on active death investigations. Trial preparation and testimony is intermittent. Communication with law enforcement, attorneys, and families are routine.

### **What training is required to become a forensic pathologist?**

It takes many years of schooling to prepare oneself for a career in forensic pathology. It begins with a four-year college degree, followed by four years of medical school. After medical school, the young physician begins a three to five-year residency training program in general pathology. The exact duration depends on whether the program is in anatomic pathology or both anatomic and clinical pathology. In any event, to become a forensic pathologist, the prerequisite training program must include at least anatomic pathology. After completion of the residency program, the pathologist embarks on a one-year specialty training program in forensic pathology at a medical examiner's or coroner's office, usually in a large city or metropolitan area.

A forensic pathologist may choose to subspecialize in areas, eg. neuropathology or cardiac pathology.

### **How many years of schooling and training does it take to become a forensic pathologist?**

After high school you'll have to undertake:

- 4 years of college, to get a bachelor's degree
- 4 years of medical school, to get the doctor of medicine (MD) degree
- 3 or 4 years of residency (3 for anatomic pathology only or 4 for combined anatomic/clinic pathology; the later track being recommended) to become eligible to take the Board exams in pathology
- 1 or 2 years of forensic pathology fellowship, to be eligible to take the subspecialty Board exam in forensic pathology

### **What should I be studying in high school/college/med school to prepare for a career as a forensic pathologist?**

**In high school**, concentrate on traditional core subjects and develop your study skills and self-discipline. Take four years of English, four of science, four of math. By the time you graduate, you should be able to write clear, polished reports without grammatical errors. If you are shy or uncomfortable speaking in public, you may benefit from getting involved in your high school's debating team or other organized speech activities.

**In college**, you will have to meet prerequisites to get into medical school. These vary from school to school, so get to know your college's premedical advisor early on. In

general, you will need two years of chemistry (inorganic and organic), two of biology, one or two of English, and one of physics. You don't have to major in a science to get into medical school, and in fact some medical schools encourage applicants to have strong backgrounds in the humanities. If you don't major in a natural science, you should still take more science courses in college than are required by the medical schools you are looking to attend.

Since medical examiners often deal across cultural lines, you may also wish to enrich your knowledge of various ethnic groups by taking some courses in minority studies. Developing proficiency in a foreign language may come in handy, too.

**In medical school**, concentrate your elective time in basic patient care. Remember that you will be a physician first and foremost. You may wish to arrange an elective rotation at a county medical examiner's office. These can usually be arranged, even if you have to travel to get there.

### **What personal traits are necessary to work as a forensic pathologist?**

There are no specific traits necessary to work as a forensic pathologist. It helps to have decent communication skills as it is necessary to discuss a wide variety of topics with many types of individuals and organizations. There is a common misconception that the pathologist only deals with the deceased. An outgoing, energetic personality makes it easier to speak to large groups such as juries during expert witness testimony in a court of law.

### **Where does the forensic pathologist work?**

The forensic pathologist usually works in a local, county, or state medical examiner or coroner system.

## **Medicolegal Death Investigator**

### **What is a Medicolegal Death Investigator?**

A medicolegal death investigator is a professional having the legal authority to investigate deaths for a medicolegal (medical examiner/coroner) jurisdiction; who performs scene investigations, collects evidence, and develops decedents' medical and social histories to assist the medical examiner/coroner in determining the cause and manner of death. Medicolegal death investigators should have a combination of education and skills encompassing areas of medicine and law.

## **Who can become a Medicolegal Death Investigator?**

There are no formal requirements to become a medicolegal death investigator. Each coroner's and medical examiner's office has different hiring practices. A medicolegal death investigator must be knowledgeable of local, state, and federal laws. In addition, a medicolegal death investigator must be the most medically knowledgeable person at the scene of the crime to determine if further investigation is necessary.

## **Do I have to have a degree?**

There are no formal educational requirements specifically for medicolegal death investigation. Any degree program dealing with Forensic Science, Natural Science, Anthropology, Nursing, or any other medically or law enforcement related field would be useful. There are several established training courses available throughout the country that teach the basic information needed in order to perform a thorough, competent medicolegal death investigation.

## **Autopsy Assistant/Prosector**

### **What is a prosector/autopsy assistant?**

A prosector is a person who dissects corpses for examination or anatomical demonstration. At the ME office, the prosector/autopsy assistant also assists with taking photographs, collecting and packaging evidence, and paperwork. [A pathology assistant (PA) is not the same as an autopsy assistant or prosector. A PA performs gross examination of surgical specimens as well as performing forensic, medicolegal, and hospital autopsies and requires a specific degree].

### **Who can become a prosector/autopsy assistant?**

There are no formal educational requirements specifically for prosector. Each coroner's and medical examiner's office may have different hiring practices. Any degree program dealing with Forensic Science, Natural Science, Anthropology, Nursing, Mortuary Science, or any other medically related field would be useful. Offices may have different requirements for this position which generally will require on the job training.