

The Autopsy

To most people, the thought of an autopsy provokes a world of unfounded myths of horror - the kind of stuff that Hollywood loves to build around a good Vincent Price movie. We think of castles high on a barren, rock-laden mountain, crashing thunder and blistering lightning in the dead of the night. We think of doctors in long white coats, with hair that stands up straight and personalities that would not endear them to the local P.T.A.

But before the pipe organ starts playing those eerie, long, sustained melodies, let me put to rest many of these myths for you.

There are times at my job when I am required to assist one of our doctors with an autopsy. I will be the first to admit that this is not one of my favorite chores at work and I certainly have no desire to do this on a regular basis. However, there is a lot to be said for this area of medicine that many of us are not aware of.

In our society there are very few jobs that render itself to more jokes, puns and antidotes than that of working in the morgue. Very few of us enjoy talking or even thinking about dying and it's a natural release of tension to make light of the subject every time it comes up. People who have died have no feelings, but to the living, having a good sense of humor seems like a logical source of survival for those who have to deal with death day-in and day-out.

Of course there can be a light hearted atmosphere in the autopsy room, but there is a very sincere atmosphere of respect for the dead within the walls of the Medical Examiners' Office. There is a clear line drawn between life and death. You can joke about politics, sports and any other 'living' topic, but you never hear that humor spill over to the deceased. During an autopsy, the atmosphere is that of an adventure in science and sincere effort to find the cause of death. The objective is to find conclusive evidence as to why a person has died and put to rest all the assumptions that accompanied the body.

There is a keen desire to not only serve the relatives, but a sense of service to the medical world by studying the causes of death in hopes of helping others live longer.

It's very important to do a very thorough autopsy when a person has several gunshot wounds all over his body. You might think the cause of death is obvious, which it may well be.

But it doesn't take a real bright defense lawyer to proclaim the victim died of something other than the bullet wounds. Trust me, if they get an autopsy report that is not thorough they will jump all over that in court.

In any autopsy that will likely end up in court, it's extremely important to rule out every possible cause of death so any jury will have a clear understanding for the persons death.

An autopsy is very much like an operating room at your local hospital with a very clean, professional atmosphere and a set method that puts the best interest in the patient and his/her family. Again, respect for the dead is the main instrument used in an autopsy.

I am quick to point out to friends who question my job choices, that it would be far more difficult for me to work in an operating room at a hospital where life and death is clearly in your hands. Seeing people die after all your efforts to save them would be very hard for me to participate in. But in an autopsy, there is obviously no pressure to save the persons' life. It becomes then a matter of scientific exploration as the emotional stress of life and death is removed.

Let me relate a story for you that might help you understand better.

When my first child was born, I was doing my fatherly best to be a supportive, pillar of strength in the delivery room. I was quite anxious as the sight of blood and pain was not something I was looking forward to.

I really believed that it would be all that I could do to stay on my feet and keep from slipping into an embarrassing mush of fearful emotions. That is until the doctor said, "There's the head". Suddenly I became more than a faint by-product. It was no longer blood and pain, but instead a new life being brought into the world, and I didn't want to miss a moment.

And though an autopsy certainly does not come with the joy of bringing in a new life, there are some similar parallels that are worth pointing out. In an autopsy, you really do set your focus on the scientific area of finding the cause of death and become removed from the blood and emotions of what most people think would come with an autopsy.

It's an adventure in science with a great deal of respect for the patient and the family. Quite often, the results of your efforts are of great service to the family.

In one case, a man was brought in with what was reported as a drinking problem as well as psychiatric problems. He was to be committed in a local psychiatric hospital when he

collapsed and died. An alcoholic - a crazy man, right? The autopsy showed that this man did not die from alcohol, nor was he necessarily suffering from a great deal of psychological problems. A very large tumor in his brain would certainly explain the outward behaviors of this man. Unfortunately, he was being treated for an emotional, psychological problem when he should have been treated for a medical problem that was never caught.

This sometimes happens, and I'm sure everyone involved was truly working for his best interests. The point here is not to point a finger and say who's right and who's wrong, but the peace of mind in knowing that this man's family could proceed with laying him to rest knowing that he was NOT a crazy alcoholic, but a man with a very serious illness that he dealt with the best way that he could under the circumstances.

In yet another case, a 6 month old baby was brought in with bruises all over him. Everyone was saying child abuse as the devastated parents were horrified by the accusations. The autopsy found that the baby had a rare blood disease that accounted for all the bruises and not the actions of the parents. It's bad enough to see your new baby slip away from you, but what a nightmare to have everyone think that you were the cause of this child's death. What a good feeling to know that your efforts had released these parents of being labeled as child abusers for the rest of their lives.

In yet another case, we worked very hard to find the reason a young man would have died. We knew he had died from internal bleeding, but did not understand how it happened. It took a bit of doing, but we eventually found the source that caused this man to bleed to death internally - a tip of a toothpick. That's right, the tip of a toothpick somehow got into this man's veins and made a slight puncture that created a very gradual leakage into his chest cavity.

This was a clear lesson of the fragility and delicate margins between life and death that makes you realize the miracle of life that we all live with in our bodies.

These are just a few examples of the many cases where an autopsy proved to be of great service to the families of the diseased.

It's not hard to see that the many myths surrounding the autopsy room are nothing more than unfounded fantasies that only serve to keep the cameras rolling on the sets of Hollywood horror movies.

An autopsy is a medical operation that not only serves to provide vital information for the

family, but plays an important role in the ongoing research in medicine that provides knowledge and understanding in its' continued efforts towards achieving better quality of life for us all.

We provide an important service to our community. And though I only worked at the morgue for a little over a year, I'll always be grateful for the experiences I had there.