

'Forensic Pathology - Principles and Practice', Dolinak D, Matshes E, Lew E. [Elsevier/ Academic Press](#), ISBN 0-12-219951-0 2005 £145

In the past few years there have been several excellent forensic pathology or medicine textbooks published - Knight's Forensic Pathology (3rd Ed), Mason and Purdue's 'Pathology of Trauma', and Payne-James' 'Forensic Medicine. Clinical and Pathological Aspects'.

Each covers aspects of forensic pathology in unique ways, and offers the reader guidance on how to tackle a particular type of death, and how to interpret pathological findings.

This book by Dolinak and colleagues comes close to achieving the 'holy grail' for the trainee pathologist, hospital pathologist and forensic pathologist - the integration of the theory of forensic pathology with practical guidance on what to actually do when faced with an unexpected or suspicious death.

Medicine is an 'art' as well as a 'science', and the same can be said of forensic pathology. The sights and smells of the mortuary are unique, and present a challenge to the trainee. The first decomposed body can be a shock to the system, and one needs to contemplate how one is to obtain any meaningful information from the remains. Badly traumatised bodies offer similar problems to the neophyte.

What is needed of course, is an approach to the subject, and in days gone past, this approach has been cultivated through experiential learning at the side of a teacher - an experienced forensic pathologist. Herein lies the problem - there are fewer and fewer such teachers, particularly in the UK, and legislative changes preventing the use of human tissues in teaching may further prevent the assimilation of forensic pathology skills for a new generation of budding pathologists.

Having emphasized that this book has been produced with these sorts of training issues in mind, Dolinak and Co. have produced an excellent guide to the subject of forensic pathology, touching on forensic anthropology for good measure.

Early chapters deal admirably with the philosophy of forensic pathology, and the process of decision making. This theme is carried throughout the book, culminating in a chapter on cause of death determination and certification.

A word of warning to readers outside the USA though - the book is well and truly grounded in that jurisdiction. The determination of 'manner of death', for example is a function of the medical examiner there, as opposed to being a function of the Coroner/ Procurator Fiscal in the UK.

Forensic medicine is a subject admirably suited to teaching via a 'case study' type approach, and many of the older texts were peppered with 'vignettes' of actual cases, used to illustrate a particular feature being described.

Dollinak and colleagues have also utilised this approach, and in the early chapters there are a series of excellent case studies illustrating the principles of scene investigation - an art that is certainly at risk of dying out in the UK as more police forces rely on civilian 'crime scene investigators' more and more.

The photographs used throughout the book are of excellent quality, and have been well composed in the mortuary and at the death scene. A chapter on forensic photography attempts to set out some common features of 'good photographs', and although the chapter is quite basic, points of interest are well made, and the authors have certainly chosen their material well to illustrate just how valuable good photographs are in forensic pathology.

Autopsy techniques are described well, and there are some fantastic photographs of layered *in situ* neck dissections, as well as the dissection of vertebral arteries and spinal cords etc.

Suggested autopsy protocols for a selection of scenarios are also presented throughout the book, and these are similar to the scenarios published by the Royal College of Pathologists in the UK. I found these to be quite useful, as an aide memoir, and would have liked to have seen this aspect expanded.

Post-mortem histology is an area of concern for trainees in the UK, with individual Coroners having idiosyncratic interpretations of the Coroner's Rules governing when tissues may be retained at autopsy. Consequently any teaching materials are greatly received, and this book does provide some detailed histology. However, this appears as a kind of 'afterthought', and the quality of the images is not as good as that of the macroscopic images.

I mentioned that the authors had *nearly* attained the 'holy grail' of forensic pathology textbooks for trainees. This is because there are a few minor 'niggles' with the book.

There are many instances throughout the text where statements are made about matters that to my mind are not 'cut and dried', such as the *ageing of fractures histologically*, the *ageing of subdural haematomas* and the *determination of post mortem interval utilizing body temperature changes*, but where these statements are either not referenced at all, or poorly referenced. Often there is no indication of the controversial nature of these matters, or where some mention is made, that controversial aspects are not discussed.

This of course may reflect the fact that there is limited space for such discussions, but there are other aspects of forensic practice, such as forensic osteology that are extensively covered in this book, and which are perhaps more peripheral to the pathologist than a thorough grasp of matters within the pathologists area of expertise.

Another 'niggle' is the intermingled use of 'metric' and 'Imperial' measurements - in one case within the same paragraph ('model' description of gunshot wound). Terminology also gets in the way of a good read in some places - 'blunt impact can result in a bruise *or* a contusion'. I thought that these were the same thing, and the authors certainly use them interchangeably themselves a little later on.

These are relatively minor points, and do not in any way detract from the fact that this really is an excellent book, particularly for pathology trainees who are not planning on becoming forensic pathologists, but who will be performing medico-legal autopsies in their subsequent professional practice.

As a forensic pathology trainee, I would liked to have seen more substance to controversial areas, and more suggested protocols for dealing with different scenarios. I would also have liked more histology, and see a gap in the market for an in depth text on this subject for trainees!

For £145 this book is a bargain! I recommend it unreservedly to all professionals involved in death investigation, and all those interested in forensic pathology. It is probably the most important text on the subject for trainee pathologists, and should take pride of place alongside 'Ackerman's Surgical Pathology'. There is a newcomer in

town, and the other forensic pathology texts will need to watch their backs!