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Forensic Pathologist

Overview

Forensic pathologists, or medical examiners, are specially trained physicians who examine the bodies of people who died suddenly, unexpectedly, or violently. The forensic pathologist is responsible for determining the cause (the ultimate and immediate reasons for the cessation of life) and manner of death (homicide, suicide, accidental, natural, or unknown).

To determine the identity of the victim and the time, manner and cause of death, the forensic pathologist:

- studies the medical history,
- evaluates crime scene evidence including witness statements,
- performs an autopsy to uncover evidence of injury or disease, and
- collects medical and trace evidence from the body for further analysis.

In addition to anatomy, the forensic pathologist may draw upon specialized knowledge and training in:

- toxicology
- firearms/ballistics
- trace evidence
- serology (blood analysis), and
- DNA technology.

A forensic pathologist may be appointed as a Medical Examiner by a legal jurisdiction such as a city, county or state.

Clinical forensic pathologists examine living patients, usually in cases where sexual assault or abuse is suspected.

Once all the evidence is analyzed, the forensic pathologist prepares a written report, and may also testify to these findings in court.

This career profile was reviewed and approved by Max Houck, M.A., Director, [Forensic Science Initiative, West Virginia University](http://fsi.research.wvu.edu/) (<http://fsi.research.wvu.edu/>).

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Working Conditions

Investigation into cause of death. They ensure that procedures regarding evidence collection are followed, and coordinate their work with law enforcement operations.

Some work full-time for the city, county, or federal government, while others work in hospitals, medical schools or with a private or group practice that contracts autopsy services to government agencies.

A typical workday can last 10-12 hours or longer, particularly if the forensic pathologist must examine a distant death site.

Forensic pathologists spend most of their time in the lab, performing autopsies or examining tissue samples under the microscope. This can involve standing for extended periods and working with small tools.

The rest of the workday is divided between writing official reports and making court appearances.

The physical demands are not great, but over time, the forensic pathologist may become emotionally affected by continual exposure to graphic violence.

Academic Requirements

High school diploma

4 years of college, earning a bachelor's degree in any major while completing course requirements for medical school

4 years of medical school, earning an M.D. or D.O. degree

4-5 years of training in anatomic, clinical and/or forensic pathology,

1 year of residency or fellowship in forensic pathology

Board certification after passing the exam

Preparation Timeline

What does it take to become a forensic pathologist?

Long, hard work. It takes a minimum of 13 years of education and training *after* high school to become a forensic pathologist.

Strength in all areas of science. Forensic pathology draws on biology, physics, chemistry, even psychology and anthropology.

Very good communication skills. Half the job of being a forensic pathologist is writing reports and giving testimony.

Intestinal fortitude. Forensic pathology is probably the most gruesome, smelly, disgusting job in medicine.

Confidence in your skills. Forensic pathologists must defend their conclusions in the face of opposition from lawyers, the media and even the victims' families.

In high school

Take advanced math, science and English courses

Develop strong writing skills

Practice public speaking in class and by joining the debate team

In college

You can choose any undergraduate major, including a humanities degree, but you must take all the science and math courses required to get into medical school

If you choose to major in forensic science, be sure the program is accredited and includes at least 24 semester hours of chemistry or biology and math, as well as all the prerequisites for medical school

Seek out experiences that expose you to different cultures and perspectives

Consider learning a foreign language

In medical school

Focus on patient care

Do an autopsy pathology rotation as an elective to make sure this is the right specialty for you

Explore opportunities to work or do a rotation at the local medical examiner's office

Professional Associations

American Academy of Forensic Sciences (<http://www.aafs.org/>)

National Association of Medical Examiners (<http://www.thename.org/>)

National Board of Medical Examiners (<http://www.nbme.org/>)

American Society for Investigative Pathology (<http://www.asip.org/>)

Funding Opportunities

Search for funding opportunities in this field (<http://www.explorehealthcareers.org>)

Enrichment Programs

Search for enrichment programs in this field (<http://www.explorehealthcareers.org>)

Source

www.aafs.org

Learn more about this field:

Forensic Science (<http://www.explorehealthcareers.com/en/Field.22.aspx>)

Salary: \$105,000 - \$500,000

Years in school: 13 - 15 *

Job outlook: Excellent

* after high school graduation

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