



Physical Anthropology Section - 2012

H23 Forensic Anthropology Fellowship Training Model

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn a model for a forensic anthropology fellowship training program and to discuss potential funding sources.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by raising awareness of the insufficiency of the current on-the-job training model practiced in the field of forensic anthropology and the advantages of a formal training program modeled after the American College of Graduate Medical Education Forensic Pathology Fellowship Program.

Few opportunities for formal post-graduate training in forensic anthropology exist. Although doctoral programs in physical/forensic anthropology are well suited for teaching the fundamentals of the field, necessary analytical skills are best obtained through casework. Medical examiner offices with in-house Diplomats of the American Board of Forensic Anthropology (D-ABFA) should develop formal training programs for emerging forensic anthropologists that involve them in diverse casework.

The American College of Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) Forensic Pathology Fellowship Program provides an excellent training model for the field of forensic anthropology. The program is a minimum of 12 months and requires the fellow to perform 200 - 300 autopsies under the supervision of a practicing forensic pathologist. The program also encourages the fellow to participate in crime scene investigation and court proceedings. The fellow must keep a log of his experiences, including: autopsies, external examinations, crime scene visits, and opportunities to observe or provide court testimony. The program requires objective assessment of fellow competence by multiple evaluators and to provide each fellow with documented semiannual evaluation of performance with feedback. ACGME requires the faculty to include a board certified forensic pathologist.

The Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences (HCIFS) Forensic Anthropology Division created a Forensic Anthropology Fellowship Program following the ACGME model. A recent doctoral graduate from a physical anthropology program was hired. The fellow was assigned a diverse caseload and was responsible for the processing, analyzing and report writing of each case. Each case was supervised by a forensic anthropologist and each report was co-signed by the fellow and supervising anthropologist. In addition to the casework, the fellow was required to conduct a research project and to present the findings at a national scientific meeting. The program was funded through the National Institution of Justice Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grant Program. Funding was awarded for salary, including a standard benefit package, and registration fees and travel expenses for participation in the national scientific meeting. The salary rate was set following the National Institute of Health Salary Guidelines for Postdoctoral Scholars.

During the program, the HCIFS Forensic Anthropology Fellow completed nine biological profile analyzes, 83 trauma analyses, 23 scene recoveries, and 41 autopsy consultations. The fellow conducted research on the trauma pattern associated with the use of an automated cardiopulmonary resuscitation device and presented the results at the American Academy of Forensic Sciences Annual Scientific Meeting. The fellow also participated in pre-trial meetings with prosecutors and defense attorneys and observed court testimony presented by a forensic anthropologist and pathologist. She attended continuing education courses that included ethical training, advancements in decedent identification, pediatric trauma seminars and medicolegal death investigation. The fellow completed rotations in the investigation division and crime laboratory.

The current on-the-job training model used by the field of forensic anthropology should be replaced with a formal training model as described here. The American Board of Forensic Anthropology requires an applicant to have three years of experience after the receipt of a doctoral degree and to submit three case reports for review. With a formal training program, the three years of experience should be replaced with a year-long fellowship program. The proposed requirement ensures that the applicant is receiving training from a D-ABFA as opposed to possibly practicing without supervision until eligible for board certification.

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