



BS2 The Working Stiffs: Writing and Publishing the Experiences of a Forensic Pathologist in Both Fiction and Non-Fiction

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Learning Overview: The goal of this presentation is to demonstrate how a collaboration between a scientist and a writer can effectuate the communication of complex forensic concepts to a lay audience.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by helping attendees be able to communicate scientific concepts to a lay audience, in writing and in testimony, and by navigating issues pertaining to the confidentiality of medical information.

The thesis of this presentation is the importance of reflecting scientific rigor in writing both non-fiction and fiction for a lay audience. The challenges of writing while continuing to testify as an expert witness in real-life criminal and civil court cases will be explored. In addition, the perpetual tension between fiction and science—maintaining a balance between narrative demands and medical verisimilitude—will be discussed.

Journal writing can be an effective way of documenting what a scientist encounters in clinical detail. Other ways of tracking forensic cases include spreadsheets and medical databases. In some offices, it is not uncommon to collect newspaper clippings of the deaths that are investigated and picked up by the media and place them in the case file. However, newspaper accounts may not be accurate and examples will be presented of how eyewitness statements and assumptions made by the police or death investigators can be found to be in error when the body is taken to autopsy. Writing and documenting what a pathologist sees at the time of autopsy is crucial for clinical decision making and peer review, including review by outside experts. Furthermore, taking written notes about one's daily experiences and what one learns through those experiences can also become a psychological outlet: a way to “decompress” after a long day of working in extreme conditions, or a way to deal with the grief and anger of family members.^{1,2} Writing can be a therapeutic exercise that supplements formal training in forensic pathology and should be encouraged in forensic fellowship training.³

Working in an understaffed and underfunded environment can also put stress on the forensic team and may incubate intramural tension. Mass fatality response, along with a backlog of routine cases delayed by ancillary lab studies, can add to the pressures pathologists experience. Journaling can help forensic professionals deal with the stresses of the job, but non-disclosure agreements and privacy policies may restrict professional communication and publication in a public forum. In academic writing, de-identification is used when sharing case reports, and this method can be used in writing non-fiction for public consumption. Fictionalizing actual forensic cases can allow scientists with a way to explore the work they do and share their experiences, both with other professionals and with the lay public.

A case report will be presented of a petty thief who stole a laptop and was chased down and shot dead in public by its owner. This case involved a complex gunshot wound trajectory analysis and the collection of property as evidence. Forensic-noir mystery writers, such as Kathy Reichs, Patricia Cornwell, and Jon Jefferson and Dr. William Bass, all of whom worked in various capacities in the forensic sciences professional discipline, inspired this presentation to explore ways to educate the public about real-world forensic science through the use of a fictional narrative voice.

Reference(s):

1. Susan Smith, Cay Anderson-Hanley, Adela Langrock, Bruce Compas. The effects of journaling for women with newly diagnosed breast cancer. *Psycho-Oncology: Journal of the Psychological, Social and Behavioral Dimensions of Cancer*. 14 (12), 1075-1082, 2005.
2. Cognitive processing, disclosure, and health: Psychological and physiological mechanisms. Susan K Lutgendorf, Philip Ullrich. American Psychological Association, 2002
3. Shannon L Arntfield, Kristen Slesar, Jennifer Dickson, Rita Charon. Narrative medicine as a means of training medical students toward residency competencies.

Forensic, Pathology, Writing