An Alternative Approach to Autopsy Education and Training

Changing of the Guard

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Formal education and training programs share many characteristics with many other activities in colleges, universities, and teaching hospitals. These include demands for the time of both teachers and those being taught, competition for time and space in curricula, competition for physical space and resources, and competition for support and attention from administrators. Training in health care brings an additional level of complexity due to changes in health care delivery, increasing regulatory oversight, limitations on the roles of students and residents, and clinical demands on teachers and trainers. Not surprisingly, these issues encourage efforts to find more cost-effective ways to teach and train, as well as to find new approaches that have better outcomes. As noted in previous articles in the Journal’s series on education and training in pathology and laboratory medicine, two current factors make this a good time to change our approaches to teaching and training: (1) recent emphasis on developing an evidence base to define the most effective ways to teach and train and (2) the emergence of new technologies for education and training.

In this issue of the Journal, Talmon and colleagues describe a new approach to teaching about the autopsy as well as an assessment of its effectiveness. This approach, termed the eAutopsy, uses a combination of didactic lectures, readings, and an interactive web-based program. In a controlled study comparing the eAutopsy with the conventional autopsy, students were surveyed to determine whether the eAutopsy was an effective teaching method. The overall response from students was positive. While one might question the value and relevance of surveys as an assessment of educational effectiveness, surveys reflect perceptions and, as the old adage states, perceptions are reality. Moreover, those being taught have a different perspective compared with those who are teaching; both are valid.

In this era one also might fairly question the value of efforts directed towards teaching and training in autopsy pathology. The lack of reimbursement for autopsies outside of a few settings, increasing demands on pathologists for different services, widespread misperception among the public and clinicians that other laboratory tests and imaging studies have supplanted the autopsy, and a perception among many that the autopsy belongs to a bygone era of medicine all have contributed to marked decreases in autopsy rates in the United States and most of Europe during the past few decades. Yet continuing to educate students and train residents in autopsy pathology clearly has merit. First, ongoing research into the contribution of the autopsy to medical care quality assurance continues to show its value, even in areas of the world with the most advanced diagnostic capacity. The value of the autopsy is likely much greater in resource-limited areas of the world. Second, baseline understanding of autopsy pathology remains valuable so that providers better understand the role of both hospital and forensic autopsies, because questions about autopsies are common at and around the time of death. Third, understanding what an autopsy is and what it can and cannot tell us remains an important part of preparedness for emerging diseases. But one must understand the autopsy before that determination can be made. Last, from a pragmatic point of view, autopsy rates likely have declined because many clinicians have never seen one, do not understand what it is, and therefore do not advocate for more autopsies.

If teaching autopsy pathology by traditional methods no longer is practicable due to declining autopsy rates, competition for time, and other factors, but the available...
evidence continues to support the value of the autopsy, then to avoid an impasse we need to develop alternative approaches.⁴⁻⁷ We should not abandon the autopsy until published evidence clearly shows that superior alternative methods for postmortem diagnosis have been validated, but perhaps should instead abandon our traditional teaching methods and replace them with something better. Almost nothing contributes more to obsolescence than clinging to outdated methods.

References