

The Autopsy

To most people, the thought of an autopsy provokes a world of unfounded myths of horror - the kind of stuff that Hollywood loves to build around a good Vincent Price movie. We think of castles high on a barren, rock-laden mountain, crashing thunder and blistering lightning in the dead of the night. We think of doctors in long white coats, with hair that stands up straight and personalities that would not endear them to the local P.T.A.

But before the pipe organ starts playing those eerie, long, sustained melodies, let me put to rest many of these myths for you.

There are times at my job when I am required to assist one of our doctors with an autopsy. I will be the first to admit that this is not one of my favorite chores at work and I certainly have no desire to do this on a regular basis. However, there is a lot to be said for this area of medicine that many of us are not aware of.

To begin with, it would be easy for us to envision the autopsy room to be very much like a M*A*S*H 4077 operating room. Obviously, when you deal with death every day, a great sense of humor and the ability to crack jokes and keep a light atmosphere are important medicines to keep on hand. And though many of my co-workers certainly have a good sense of the quick-wit and sharp tongue, and there is an obvious light, relaxed atmosphere throughout the workplace, it must be noted that all the humorous put-downs and jokes are channeled towards each other and never towards the diseased.

I say this, because in our society there are very few jobs that render itself to more jokes, puns and antidotes than that of working in the morgue. Very few of us enjoy talking or even thinking about dying and it's a natural release of tension to make light of the subject every time it comes up. So when we think of doctors and assistants working in the autopsy room, we obviously think of Hawkeye, Trapper, Honeycut and Co. filling the air with jokes and puns, and why not? People who have died have no feelings, they can't fight back, and for most of us on the outside, this seems like a logical source of survival for those who have to deal with death day-in and day-out.

But how refreshing it is to find out that nothing could be further from the truth. There is a

very sincere since of respect for the dead within the walls of the Medical Examiners' Office. During an autopsy, the atmosphere is that of an adventure in science and not a mockery of life. The objective is to find conclusive evidence as to why a person has died and put to rest all the assumptions that accompanied the body.

There is a keen desire to not only serve the relatives, but a since of service to the medical world by studying the causes of death in hopes of helping others live longer.

This is not to say that the autopsy room is a stuffy, serious place to work. Quick wits, sharp tongues and laughter are certainly easy to find. The point here is that there is a clear boundary drawn that keeps the humorous comments centered around each other and the world of the living while the comments towards the deceased remains scientific and supported with a great deal of respect for the person and their family.

There are many times when my friends will ask me, "How can you stand watching them cut up dead people like that?" I have several answers for them, a few of which I will share with you.

For one thing, it's not as if I'm a party to the chain-saw massacre. Too many people think that these doctors take big saws and start hacking away at bodies, looking for the cause of death. Not so! An autopsy is very much like an operating room at your local hospital with a very clean, professional atmosphere and a set method that puts the best interest in the patient and his/her family. Again, respect for the dead is the main instrument used in an autopsy.

Too, I am quick to point out that it would be far more difficult for me to work in an operating room at a hospital where life and death are clearly in your hands. Seeing people die after all your efforts to save them would be a very hard nut for me to swallow. In an autopsy, there is obviously no pressure of trying to save the persons' life. It becomes, then, clearly a matter of scientific exploration as the emotional stress of life and death is removed.

And on that note, let me relate another story for you that might help you understand better.

When my first child was being born, I was doing my fatherly best to be a supportive, pillar of strength in the delivery room. I was quite anxious as the sight of blood and pain was not something I was looking forward to.

I really believed that it would be all that I could do to stay on my feet and keep from

going into cardiac arrest. That is until the doctor said, "There's the head". Suddenly, I became more than a faint by-product. It was no longer blood and pain, but instead a new life being brought into the world.

And though an autopsy certainly does not come with the joy of bringing in a new life, there are some similar parallels that are worth note. In an autopsy, you really do set your focus on the scientific area of finding the cause of death and become removed from the blood and emotions of what most people think would come with an autopsy.

It's an adventure in science with a great deal of respect for the patient and the family. Quite often, the results of your efforts are of great service to the family.

In one case, a man was brought in with what was reported as a drinking problem as well as psychiatric problems. He was to be committed in a local psychiatric hospital when he collapsed and died. An alcoholic - a crazy man, right? The autopsy showed that this man did not die from alcohol, nor was he necessarily suffering from a great deal of psychological problems. A very large tumor in his brain would certainly explain the outward behaviors of this man. Unfortunately, he was being treated for an emotional, psychological problem when he should have been treated for a medical problem.

This sometimes happens, and I'm sure everyone involved was truly working for his best interests. The point here is not to point a finger and say who's right and who's wrong, but the peace of mind in knowing that this man's family could proceed with laying him to rest knowing that he was NOT a crazy alcoholic, but a man with a very serious illness that he dealt with the best way that he could under the circumstances.

In yet another case, a 6 month old baby was brought in with bruises all over him. Everyone was saying child abuse as the devastated parents were horrified by the accusations. The autopsy found that the baby had a blood disease that accounted for all the bruises and not the actions of the parents. It's bad enough to see your new baby slip away from you into eternal sleep, but what a nightmare to have everyone think that you were the cause of this child's death. What a good feeling to know that your efforts had released these parents of being labeled as child abusers for the rest of their lives.

These are just a few examples of the many cases where an autopsy proved to be of great service to the families of the diseased.

It's not hard to see that the many myths surrounding the autopsy room are nothing more than unfounded fantasias that only serve to keep the cameras rolling on the sets of Hollywood horror movies.

An autopsy is a medical operation that not only serves to provide vital information for the family, but plays an important role in the ongoing research in medicine that provides knowledge and understanding in its' continued efforts towards achieving better quality of life for us all.

We provide an important service to our community. Our sense of humor provides an important service for those of us who work within the boundaries of the autopsy room.