Psychological Resiliency in Forensic Pathologists

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Introduction

- In high-trauma occupations (i.e., first responders, military, medical professionals), individuals are exposed to trauma.
- Forensic Pathologists (FPs) are exposed to trauma by working with the dead on a daily basis; this includes retrieving bodies from death scenes and performing autopsies.
- Questions about FPs: their psychological impacts, coping skills, and development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Researchers have found that FPs are exposed to various types of stressors, including anxiety, grief, and burnout.

Perspectives, Death Attitudes, and Coping (continued)

- Emotions of fear, grief, repulsion, and belief in the afterlife tend to be more prevalent in those that were exposed to the forensic path (Papadomina et al., 2008; Sergentanis et al., 2010).
- Winkelmans and colleagues (2007) found attitudes toward autopsies play a key role in medical students’ involvement in dissection. Of those who were queried in a positive autopsies component, they were more educated and invested more time, while those with emotional qualms tended to participate less (D’Amore et al., 2007).
- Several studies with sample populations of disaster workers, funeral directors, and sixth year medical students showed that anxiety about death, horror or helplessness, avoidance of occupation, and death exposure, and passive thinking about death or passive coping skills were associated with increased somatic and psychological responses, especially posttraumatic stress symptoms. These studies found that prevention or accepting coping mindsets about death were associated with decreased symptoms (Link & Joseph, 2006; Sergentanis et al., 2010).
- Although studies have found mixed results regarding social support’s advantages, Hyman (2004), North et al. (2001), Link & Joseph (2006), and Kouvelakis et al. (2016), have revealed that many individuals are emotionally affected by the trauma they witness.
- Trauma can result from personal losses, in addition to the physical effects of death, disease, or disability.
- Farmers and students (Link & Joseph, 2006).
- The small number of practicing FPs in the U.S. is about 400 compared to an estimated 20,000 hospital pathologists.
- According to all the interviewees, individuals need to be cut out of the equation.
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Coping and Psychological Resilience Training

- Some occupations have begun implementing methods to improve coping and psychological resilience:
  - The Resilience Training Program at UCLA helps pediatric residents cope with job-related emotional trauma. Areas covered in the module include techniques on communicating with patients and their family members, and strategies to regulate emotions through reflective composition, goal setting, and problem-solving (Stringer, 2017).
  - Consultants were asked their opinions on the implementation of a resilience-building class or workshop:
    - Dr. A. believed a class could be useful, but explained that one couldn’t teach or tell individuals how to feel (personal communication, July 11, 2017).
    - Dr. Q. opined that a class would be beneficial, citing that she felt there was not enough done to prepare or help students with the trauma they would face and how to cope with it (personal communication, July 11, 2017).
  - Dr. Wecht was not against a class, elaborating that it should be implemented prior to forensic pathology training.

Conclusion

Similar to military personnel, who sacrifice for their nation, FPs are also on a mission. Their mission is to promote the sciences to speak for the dead; to provide answers to loved ones of the deceased, law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and society as a whole while putting their psychological resiliency to the test every day.

FPs are exposed to trauma on a regular basis but do not receive any training or assistance in learning to cope with that trauma. Existing research with other professionals could be applied to forensic pathologists to increase coping strategies and build psychological resilience to trauma. In turn, this could bolster the numbers of forensic psychologists.

Dr. Cyril Wecht, forensic pathologist, author, attorney, and medical-legal consultant. He has multiple academic appointments, a forensic science institute named after him (The Cyril H. Winkelman Institute of Forensic Science and Law at Duquesne University), and has conducted more than 5000 postmortem examinations for Allegheny county coroner and medical examiner, investing more than 20 plus years in the coroner’s office in Pittsburgh (Wecht, n.d.). Furthermore, he has conducted over 1000 autopsies and lectures, attended over 30,000 postmortem examinations. He has discussed and taken part in high profile death analyses including the Waco Branch Davidians, President John F. Kennedy, Senator Robert J. Kennedy, Elvis Presley, and Vincent Foster (Wecht, n.d.). Dr. Wecht is also associated with the ongoing battle of football-related concussions and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in gridiron and small players and the NFL among many more cases (Gatter, 2017).

Figure 1: Dr. Cyril Wecht

Prior to becoming a forensic pathologist, Dr. Wecht practiced medicine at Bellevue Hospital in New York, in addition to being an author. He served as the Director of the New York State Police Medical/Legal Investigations Unit and the Chief Medical Examiner of New York. Dr. Baden hosted a long-running television series of 13 years on HBO (Autopsy), had his own private practice, and held numerous academic appointments (Baden, n.d.). He has conducted over 15,000 postmortem examinations and has also testified in over 2000 cases around the world as well as high profile cases, and cases for the FBI, the VA, the ATF, and the Justice Department, some of which include John Belushi, Michael Brown, Medgar Evers, Eric Garner, President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., the President of Poland, O.J. Simpson, Tsar Nicholas II (Baden, n.d.).