

sounding board



Why Are Very Few Autopsies Performed Today?

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Thirty years ago autopsies were performed regularly in both teaching and private hospitals. In fact, teaching hospitals had to have a certain percentage of deaths certified by autopsy as part of the educational process. Today, autopsies are rare. Most that are performed are for very specific purposes, usually litigation-oriented. Complete autopsies are very unusual today.

Years ago autopsies were requested to find out exactly what was wrong with the patient who had expired. It was a learning experience. If a resident in training had a patient expire, it was part of the educational process to attend the autopsy and learn what had actually happened as part of the learning process about practicing medicine. The resident could see first-hand what he may have missed and did not diagnose. Interesting cases and very educational cases were presented at grand rounds, including a presentation of the clinical course, presumed diagnoses, and autopsy findings. The pathology house staff and attendings presented the findings with the gross organs and microscopic slides on kodachromes.

Interesting cardiac cases were presented at grand rounds with the dissected heart. A neuropathologist often presented interesting brain cases at neurology and neurosurgical grand rounds. Medical students, house staff, fellows, and attendings saw things first-hand.

Today, most autopsy requests are to determine what the physician missed and should have been able to find out. In other words, most hospital autopsies are requested with litigation in

mind. Most hospital pathologists have no interest in the legal arena and are never encouraged to pursue what the clinician missed or should have known. Table 1 lists the usual reasons autopsies are requested. The most common reason that requested autopsies are not performed is cost.

Table 1: Reasons Autopsies are Requested

Litigation

Litigation

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Litigation

Litigation

Many autopsies are limited to specific organs or regions of the body, such as the chest or head. The only areas in which complete autopsies are performed are forensic autopsies at the coroner or medical examiner's office. Soon, autopsies will be a dying art.

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