

Joseph A. Felo, D.O.



Current position:

Chief Deputy Medical Examiner & Forensic Pathology Fellowship Program Director, Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner's Office

Education history:

Undergraduate Education: St. Lawrence University, Bachelor of Science

Medical School: Kansas City College of Osteopathic Medicine, Doctor of Osteopathy

Residency Program: Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Anatomic & Clinical Pathology

Fellowship: Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office, Forensic Pathology

HOW DID YOU INITIALLY BECOME INTERESTED IN FORENSIC PATHOLOGY?

I went to an osteopathic medical school, planning on a primary care career in either pediatrics or family practice. I loved the histology and pathology courses in medical school that piqued my interest in pathology. I would often list pathology as a possible career choice during clinical rotations and was often discouraged by attendings, and told not to seek pathology, because I was so good with living patients that I should not waste those talents on the dead ones. I completed an osteopathic internship and unfortunately one of my patients died, but fortunately, I was able to attend his autopsy, which was the first autopsy for me. That autopsy experience cinched my decision to pursue pathology. With my early interests in osteopathy and primary care, forensic pathology was the ideal path for me, as it lets me examine the whole body and share my talents on both the dead patients and their surviving loved ones.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR ASPIRING FORENSIC PATHOLOGISTS, INCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS TO MATCH INTO A PATHOLOGY RESIDENCY PROGRAM AND ACCEPTANCE INTO A FORENSIC PATHOLOGY FELLOWSHIP?

Most importantly is to find programs that you like and in which you feel comfortable. Three or four years of residency and one year of fellowship are long times to be unhappy. One mentor of mine told me to strive for the best reputable programs, because you will be

asked about your educational background many times, especially during court proceedings. Keep in mind, that to be a competent forensic pathologist, you first have to be a competent general pathologist, so do your best to secure a residency that will expose you to all aspects of pathology. The more variety you see in residency and fellowship, the less you'll have to study (hopefully) for the board examinations.

WHAT IS THE MOST REWARDING ASPECT OF BEING A FORENSIC PATHOLOGIST?

I have been fortunate to be the forensic pathology fellowship program director at the Cuyahoga County Coroner and Medical Examiner's Office for the last 15 years. I am very proud that our program was the second accredited forensic pathology fellowship program and is currently the oldest program in America. During the past 15 years, I have had the honor and privilege of training 18 forensic pathologists. It delights me to no end to see the fellows develop confidence and competency as they mature into the next generation of forensic pathologists.

WHAT IS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE OF BEING A FORENSIC PATHOLOGIST?

Maintaining a positive and optimistic attitude about self and society, especially when dealing with death and tragedy on a daily basis. My Irish immigrant grandfather used to say, "work hard and play harder." It is hard work to be happy, but happiness has been very rewarding for me in my professional and personal lives.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES/CHALLENGES OF FORENSIC PATHOLOGY TODAY?

No secret here, but I feel recruitment for future forensic pathologists is a critical issue. I am encouraged by those who have been visible in promoting one of the most gratifying medical careers available. Personally, I have never turned down an opportunity to talk about forensic pathology, be it at the high school and college levels as well as during lectures given to medical students, residents, first responders, and community events. I encourage everyone to talk to anyone interested in forensic pathology, because many years later, when you talk to someone on their career path to forensic pathology and they tell you how influential you were in helping them make their decision, it is way cool and gratifying!

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST MEMORABLE CASE AND WHY?

I certainly have had many memorable cases, but my MOST memorable case was during my third year of residency. I was in the hospital morgue consulting with a junior resident, and the autopsy assistant was a young lady from Tennessee getting autopsy experience so that she could sit for her Pathology Assistant board exam. I had talked with the young lady a few times briefly before, but never had the courage to ask her out on a date until I

saw her over the body eviscerating the abdominal organs. It was then that I asked her out on our first date, she said yes, we were married two years later, and we have been happily married ever since. That case was not only the day I first asked my future wife out for a date but was also the day I realized how comfortable and confident I am in the morgue.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST UNEXPECTED FINDING YOU HAVE ENCOUNTERED DURING A CASE?

The most unexpected finding was during the only autopsy I performed on a parachutist. The recreational parachutist was witnessed to be unresponsive upon landing and sustained open fractures of both lower extremities. High on the differential was a cardiac event during his descent. However, at autopsy, he had a high cervical spinal fracture with near total lacerated transection of the cervical spinal cord. Inspection of his helmet revealed a scuff mark over the frontal region that was thought to have come from him striking his head at the top of the airplane door frame resulting in a hyperextension injury of his cervical spine and spinal cord. Wicked cool! Don't underestimate the value of examining helmets, usually during motorcycle deaths, but also other helmet-related deaths.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT WORKING WITH YOUR TEAM?

I have been extremely fortunate to have trained and have spent my entire forensic pathology career at the Cuyahoga County Office. The best reason for my staying in the one office is because of the high talent the entire staff of the office has to offer. We are fortunate to have all disciplines of the forensic sciences housed in the same building, which helps make it easy for personal and professional interactions between the scientific disciplines. It also makes our forensic pathology fellowship a great training program that I am proud to direct. I know there are many other great fellowship training programs, but the botanist in me feels that the grass is always greener on my side of the fence!

WHO IS YOUR ROLE MODEL AND WHY?

Dr. Robert Challener was my forensic pathology fellowship program director and the most influential forensic pathologist on my career. He was nearing retirement during my fellowship and had raised 6 children, so he had that father/grandfather air about him. He was also a surgical pathologist that left private practice to pursue forensic pathology. Dr. Challener instilled in me the value of being a quality anatomic pathologist as a basis for being a quality forensic pathologist. Dr. Challener's mentor was Dr. Lester Adelson, and several Friday afternoons during my fellowship, Dr. Challener would bring Dr. Adelson into our office where the two of them would invite me to join them, as they offered me learning points on some of my autopsies. Now as the current forensic pathology fellowship program director in Cleveland, I am proud to continue the great teaching legacy that preceded me, that I now pass on to the next generation of Cleveland-trained forensic pathologists.

WHAT ARE YOUR HOBBIES AND HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN A WORK-LIFE BALANCE?

One of the foundations of osteopathic medicine is that a balance of mind, body, and spirit are key to maintaining a healthy life. I am efficient at work and rarely bring work home. That way, I can spend time with my family and pursue the many hobbies I have to help maintain my healthy and happy life.

Some of the hobbies I enjoy include:

1. Gardening: I have over 100 plants in my office so that I can always be surrounded by life even after spending a day surrounded by death.
2. Crossword and logic puzzles: Exercise for the brain.
3. Cross-stitching: Very relaxing and I enjoy creating artwork.
4. Home beer brewing: I grow my own hops and need to use them somehow.
5. Rollerblading: I have yet to see a case come into our office when someone died while rollerblading, so I figure it must be safer than any other mode of transportation.
6. Watching sports: My favorite teams are historically not successful but supporting them helps keep me humble.
5. Outdoor Christmas lights: My time of the year!

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE WORK SOUNDTRACK AND WHY?

I work in Cleveland, so it's gotta be Rock 'n Roll! Rock music is usually playing on the radio in the autopsy suite. My son started playing drums when he was 7 and over the last 15 years, he has played and performed many rock songs at a variety of different venues. I especially like hearing a song that he has performed at one of his concerts come on the radio while I am doing an autopsy, then my toe tapping begins!

WHAT IS YOUR MOST-LIKED MEAL AT YOUR FAVORITE LOCAL RESTAURANT?

My wife is an awesome cook, so we don't go out to restaurants all that much. So, any meal at Chez Felo prepared by Chef Mrs. Doctor Felo is my favorite. I give my wife a break from cooking over most holiday long weekends and slow smoke pork ribs. Enjoying smoked pork ribs with my own brewed IPA beer on my backyard deck, that is surrounded by my planter container vegetable garden, with my wife, son, and dog with rock 'n roll music playing in the background is truly what life is all about for me!