

Gregory G. Davis, MD



Current position:

Professor and Director, Forensic Division, Department of Pathology, UAB

Chief Coroner/Medical Examiner, Jefferson County, Alabama

Education history:

Undergraduate Education: Vanderbilt University, BA chemistry

Medical School: Vanderbilt University

Residency Program: Vanderbilt University, Department of Pathology

Fellowship: San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office

Other: School of Public Health, UAB, MSPH in epidemiology

HOW DID YOU INITIALLY BECOME INTERESTED IN FORENSIC PATHOLOGY?

I enjoyed chemistry and working in a lab, leading me into pathology. In pathology I enjoyed autopsy work, both starting at the end and working backward to determine the cause of death and working with my hands. I was moonlighting performing autopsies and thought that if only I could find a job that would allow me to perform autopsies for a living, then I would have the perfect job for me. Nevertheless, I thought that I would dislike forensic pathology, because I thought it would give me nightmares. When I was actually exposed to forensic pathology, I found that I liked it better than anything else I had ever done in medicine, and I had no nightmares. Julia Goodin exemplified being a forensic pathologist to me during that month. I changed my mind about my career and have been glad ever since.

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?

Do not load your electives during medical school or pathology residency toward forensic pathology. You will get to practice forensic pathology for decades. Use these unique opportunities to experience other aspects of medicine that pertain to forensic pathology (e.g. psychiatry in a prison or homeless setting, addiction medicine, domestic altercations

and grief counseling with hospital chaplains, etc). Match into a residency program that will make you learn your anatomic and clinical pathology, as you must learn this material to be a good forensic pathologist, and you must pass the general pathology board exam before you can sit for the forensic exam. Apply yourself to learning pathology as a whole and be patient to learn forensic pathology later when it is time for fellowship.

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

Two things make this field rewarding for me: One is the rare occasion when you either detect a homicide that people did not recognize was a homicide or when you are able to show that a death everyone has told you is a homicide is not a homicide at all. Those rare cases are when you make a real difference, and that is why society needs capable forensic pathologists. The other reward is helping families in a difficult time. Once in a great while a family expresses appreciation for our work, but more often you receive no thanks. Even so, the family benefits from your work and care at one of the most difficult times in their life. Know that, and be confident in the importance of your good work as a forensic pathologist.

WHAT IS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE OF BEING A FORENSIC PATHOLOGIST?

Initially the greatest challenge is testifying, because it is new, different and daunting. Later the greatest challenge is to remain a humble, caring forensic pathologist after seeing so much mayhem and inhumanity day after day. Cynicism would be easy, but continued humble care is what the family needs from you, and what you need for yourself, if you are to remain whole.

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

Attracting caring, devoted individuals into the practice of forensic pathology. Even if all of medicine misunderstands the importance of forensic pathology, some people do understand. Academic medicine is rife with individuals loudly repeating that any discipline of medicine other than their chosen discipline is a waste of time and effort. Do not let someone that narrow-minded dismiss forensic pathology, or any other specialty that appeals to you, as unworthy. As long as you seek to help others with your training and skill, then you are doing a noble thing.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST MEMORABLE CASE AND WHY?

My most memorable case was a white male killed by a black male in a jail cell. I knew that the case would be difficult to handle as soon as I saw the body. This death did not make national news, but it led the local news for weeks. People threatened to kill me, and an armed guard accompanied me when I went to testify before a special council on this matter. Medical school taught me nothing about how to deal with all this publicity and these

threats. In time I spoke to a representative of the group that threatened to kill me. That person casually mentioned that everyone knew that I was only saying what people in charge paid me to say. I can endure many things, but I will never allow a false statement impugning my integrity to go without response. I was watching a clock, so I am correct when I say that I spoke for 10 minutes straight, telling the person reasons why he could believe my statements and reasons why his own statements appeared self-serving. Long before I finished my response the person was saying, "Yes, sir, I understand, sir." After that I received no threats. I learned anew that bullies are afraid of courage. I do not wish such a case on anyone, but nothing since has compared to that case. My outlook now is that as long as no one is threatening to kill me, then things must be going pretty well. Difficult though it was, that case established me as a capable forensic pathologist both in the community and in my own mind.

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

I examined a body in active decay found in a drug house. I kept finding small bones mixed with the decomposing soft tissue. I was puzzled for long minutes, and then I suddenly realized that the decedent was a female late in a pregnancy when she died. I was so shocked that I exclaimed out loud, even though I was alone in the room at the time. That was by far the most stunning moment of my career.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT WORKING WITH YOUR TEAM?

We support each other. If someone notices that one of us needs help or a break for a moment, then we say so. That mutual care enables us to continue working together year after year.

WHO IS YOUR ROLE MODEL AND WHY?

Randy Hanzlick. Early in my career I had a spectacular opportunity to work on a committee with Randy every few months over the course of a year and a half. During that time Randy embodied what I wanted to be. He was, and is, capable, clever, observant, quick to see connections, witty, and a voice speaking for the importance of good death investigation. Randy has a clear vision of what is important, and he does not let clamor distract him from his goal. He also represents the importance of good death investigation, simply by being so capable. I strive to be like Randy.

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

I enjoy cooking, especially baking. I have been baking bread since I was in my teens. I also enjoy hiking and running. I run because I enjoy it, but I also run so that I can run with Dan Dye, Kelly Lear, and Marcus Nashelsky whenever we are together in any combination. I

have to keep running all year so that I can run with my friends those few times a year that we are together. I enjoy hiking with Sue, my wife, and with our daughters Claire and Camille. As we hike, we may talk of books we have read lately. Camille and I enjoy playing cribbage, a game that has been passed from parent to child in my family for generations.

Over the years, all forensic pathologists that I have observed clearly understand that life consists of more than work alone. Family and friends are vital to well-being, and those relationships deepen with time spent together. I make maintaining a balance between life and work a priority.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE WORK SOUNDTRACK AND WHY?

We listen to many songs, but I have special consideration for a good song that pertains to forensic practice. Many such songs exist, some obvious ("I Shot the Sheriff" by Bob Marley), some less obvious ("Use Me" by Bill Withers), some perhaps obscure ("Streets of Paradise" by Richard and Linda Thompson). Other songs in this vein include "One Way Out" by the Allman Brothers, "Chain of Fools" by Aretha Franklin, "Sheep Go to Heaven" by Cake, "The Goodbye Look" by Donald Fagen, "Let Him Dangle" by Elvis Costello, "Sweet Old World" by Emmylou Harris, "Little Miss S" by the New Bohemians, "Digging in the Dirt" by Peter Gabriel, "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore" by the Smiths, "Living for the City" by Stevie Wonder, "Don't Take Me Alive" by Steely Dan, "Walking in the Woods" by The Pursuit of Happiness, and "Frank's Wild Years" by Tom Waits. "Skeletons" by Rickie Lee Jones is special, too heartbreaking for the morgue. In my office I listen to jazz, particularly Steve Kuhn and Marcin Wasilewski.

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

Steak frites with the caramel chocolate nut tart at Chez Fonfon. There are many good meals, but that particular meal assumed a place of pride after my family endured a long day of hiking and each ordered steak frites at the restaurant when we finally got to eat. Sharing that particular meal on that day was magical.