

## Mary Ann Sens, MD



### Current position:

Professor and Chair of Pathology, University of North Dakota  
NAME, Executive Vice President

### Education history:

College: Eastern Michigan University, BS, Chemistry

PhD: University of South Carolina, Physical Inorganic Chemistry;  
Nuclear Magnetic Resonance of Metals  
Post-doctoral in microwave and Raman spectroscopy,  
Columbia, SC

MD: Medical University of South Carolina; Charleston, SC

AP: Medical University of South Carolina; Charleston, SC

FP (experience trained): Medical University of South Carolina

## HOW DID YOU INITIALLY BECOME INTERESTED IN FORENSIC PATHOLOGY?

I put myself through medical school working various jobs. From class notetaking, to projectionist for weekend movies, to nighttime sitter / companion to a distinguished, elderly Charleston woman in one of the Charleston large mansions, where the first two floors were open to the public and the top floor was ours. Finally, I got a great job as an Assistant Forensic Investigator that was essentially a full time job done weekends and evenings. I became fascinated with the practice of death scene investigations and forensic autopsies, that job lead me into pathology and into forensic pathology. My husband of 49+ years had been with me, encouraging me throughout. We met in graduate school and have been a team since then.

## 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?

I have never regretted my decision to go into pathology and forensic pathology. I stayed at the same school that I went to medical school for pathology training. This had some advantages (knowing most people, having a house, knowing the town), but had some disadvantages in that everyone remembered you as a student. If you do not mind a move,

seeing another residency or area of the country broadens your experience and perspective. It actually enriches your evaluation of cases since different perspectives and prospects are present in each office and each “forensic lineage” has different practices and insights.

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

We give families and society answers they cannot get any other way in an objective and scientific framework. We are defined by diversity and inclusion- everyone will die, so the breath of people our practice consumes is the largest possible. Forensic pathology provides an unparalleled opportunity for truth through science. I find it most rewarding to find something that explains the death or circumstances, gives families information or addresses misconceptions. I feel it is one of the few professions that can advance social and other justice while delivering medical care and evaluation. I am most fortunate to work in areas where respect for forensic pathology and the necessary independence of forensic pathology are present among the people I work with.

### **WHAT IS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE OF BEING A FORENSIC PATHOLOGIST?**

The greatest challenge is to remain independent. Increasingly, FP is viewed as an arm of police and the judicial system. Some states even have provisions where the Chief Medical Examiner serves at the pleasure of the Attorney General. There is increasing pressure to turn public health issues into criminal prosecutions. I also sense an increasing demand from families and potential for disruption and action directed toward an individual forensic pathologist. This has (is) happening to me from a case nearly a decade old. I am most fortunate to be strongly and unequivocally supported by our Counties, State and school – but others may not be so lucky.

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

- 1) Recruitment and growth of new talent.
- 2) Developing and delivering science in forensic pathology BY forensic pathologist – not another group, another profession or another entity –we should define our research needs and knowledge gaps to provide advancement. Funding should be available directly to us.
- 3) Maintaining independence.
- 4) Debt issues from school – although not unique to forensic. Being in academics, most of the outrageous tuition increases are for (IMHO) non-essential and duplicative administration, fees, and so many non-educational fluff within universities, in addition to excessive records, control from accreditations and the explosion of “for profit” colleges

(or degree mills). Forgiveness of student loans must be coupled with some tough love to institutions of higher learning to trim fat and administration, and focus on education.

### **WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST MEMORABLE CASE AND WHY?**

There are so many. I remember being a medical student “reading” slides with a senior member of the department – I brought him an autopsy case I had, with some unique histology. He was very senior – having taken one of the first ABP examinations in pathology in 1940. He commented that he had never seen this particular findings, then pushed back from his chair and said “Pathology is the most fascinating and unique field. You learn something every single day – and few professions can say that. If you are not finding something unique every day, you are not looking or thinking hard enough.” I must say that with so many unique forensic cases I have seen, the one I often tell students about was an elderly farmer, wanting to stay at his homestead, but with children and wife being gone and driving ability waning, that wish was in doubt. A family conference was held. He did not want to live with any of his children, although several would have welcomed him, and he did not want to live in “the big town” in an independent living complex. The key was he needed to drive to stay on the land. So he agreed to only drive during the day, drive only within his small community and let his family take him to physician appointments or other larger places. Finally, and most reluctantly, he agreed to use a seatbelt, although he said he never wore it on 70+ years of driving, did not like them, and thought they were hard to operate with his arthritis. A few months went by and he was discovered in his burned car in the middle of a field near his home. The body was charred, clothing and seat belt burned but the clip to the seat belt showed it had been in use.

The family was devastated. They imagined him rolling into the field then desperately trying to exit the burning car. They totally blamed themselves for this horrific death by burning. An autopsy demonstrated a massive pontine hemorrhage, likely related to hypertension. The family grief and guilt changed totally with this diagnosis – from grief and guilt, to the comfort of knowing he was doing what he wanted, when the massive stroke killed him, causing the car to run off the road into a field, and then catch fire in the underbrush. They were so happy for a natural death.

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

- Child abuse that was not abuse, but had another explanation.
- Abuse / homicide proven when nothing suspicious was initially noted.
- Unsuspected natural disease that explains the death or that has family genetic implications.
- Identifying an acute public health hazard (leaking CO from furnace in housing project).

**WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT WORKING WITH YOUR TEAM?**

Lots of good times all working for a goal, like building a facility and/or achieving NAME accreditation.

Right now, I am fortunate to have State, County, and school support to work toward establishing a future culture in forensic pathology with heavy use of physician extenders, modern data base entry, systems strongly tied to public health and database collection (Will be recruiting very soon – keep posted). I want everyone who works with me to advance to their full potential – I believe my greatest job is to smooth the way for that to happen.

**WHO IS YOUR ROLE MODEL AND WHY?**

Maya Angelo and Louise Erdrich– I love strong women, poetry and truth.

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

I love to travel and often enjoy needle arts – knitting, cross-stitch, etc. I love arts and music, although not particularly talented in either.

**WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE WORK SOUNDTRACK AND WHY?**

Zeppelin – Especially Stairway to Heaven.

Anything and everything Motown (being a motor city girl when it all was happening).

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

Draft of beer and burger at an English pub with my husband (who avoids beer but likes a hard cider).