

Keith Pinckard, M.D., Ph.D.



Current position:

Chief Medical Examiner, Travis County, Texas

Education history:

Undergraduate Education: B.S. Biochemistry, University of Arizona

Medical School: M.D./Ph.D. (Immunology), Washington University School of Medicine

Residency Program: AP/CP, Washington University School of Medicine/Barnes-Jewish Hospital

Fellowship: FP, St. Louis City Medical Examiner/St. Louis University School of Medicine

HOW DID YOU INITIALLY BECOME INTERESTED IN FORENSIC PATHOLOGY?

When I was a kid, I enjoyed watching *Quincy* on television. I suspected of course that television did not likely represent the field accurately, but it did spark my interest when considering a career. I was always interested in the sciences in school, and became interested in scientific research during college, when I decided that I would pursue an M.D./Ph.D. program. The scientific training of the PhD portion lends itself very well to the practice of forensic pathology in terms of reasoning and critical appraisal of literature. It was during medical school that I sought out Dr. Michael Graham at the St. Louis City Medical Examiner's office. He allowed me to spend pretty much all the time I wanted at his office, and he spent a lot of time teaching me both during medical school and into residency. It worked out very well for me in that I was later able to do my fellowship there. He was an amazing teacher and encouraged me over the course of those several years.

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?

Several of my mentors told me a long time ago that in order to be a good *forensic* pathologist, you first have to be a good *pathologist*. Pick the residency program where you will get the best pathology training. Don't worry about forensic pathology at the moment, or even try to pick a residency in the city where you think you'd like your fellowship to be.

Just focus on getting the best pathology training you can. There will be a local death investigation system regardless of where your pathology residency is; introduce yourself to the forensic pathologists there and get some exposure to the field. Fellowship program directors are going to expect this, and they will also probably want to see at least one letter of recommendation from a forensic pathologist. Go to the NAME meetings and give a presentation. Introduce yourself to people. We are a small and friendly group—people will come to know you very quickly. The fellowship application process will soon be much easier, in my opinion, since we will have a match program next year (thank you, Dr. Gill!). I also tell applicants to pick a fellowship that they think will be the best fit for them from a purely educational standpoint. Each program has its own characteristics and style, and the place where you train is going to shape the forensic pathologist that you become. Considerations like geography, weather, proximity to family, etc., might be better left for one's choice of job *after* fellowship. After all, fellowship is only a year long (and it goes by quickly) and there is no guarantee that there will be a job opportunity at the same office as your fellowship. Pick the best fellowship program for you, in order to get the best education/experience you can and then get the job you want!

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

The most rewarding aspect for me is working up a case very well, which brings its own sense of satisfaction, and then being able to provide answers and explanations to families. We really are the decedent's last physician, and it is a great feeling to know that we have brought at least some closure to the family.

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

I think the biggest challenge we are facing as a subspecialty is the workforce issue. We do not have anywhere near the number of forensic pathologists needed in this country, and it does not appear to be getting any better. There are fewer medical students going into pathology residencies in general, and so of course this trickles down to forensic pathology as well. I firmly believe that it is up to us to foster interest in the next generation of students and encourage people to enter the field. Ask any forensic pathologist what steered them toward this career path, and I would bet you that most of us have a story about someone in the field who influenced, encouraged, and mentored them. Mine was Dr. Graham. I think we should all pay it forward.

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

A bullet in the gallbladder, that had arrived there through the liver at the gallbladder bed. There were a few gallstones along with it, so I didn't notice it on initial palpation. Strangely enough, a colleague had a similar case!

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT WORKING WITH YOUR TEAM?

The team itself. I am very lucky to work with an amazing team of individuals who are talented and dedicated to our mission. Whether it's pathology, investigations, morgue, toxicology, histology, or administration, everyone is working together toward our common goals. This is what gets us through adversity such as increases in caseload, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the recent winter storm we experienced in Texas.

I enjoy learning from the people I work with. I like talking about cases with others, hearing different viewpoints, and even debating cause and manner on the really challenging cases. I like hearing other perspectives, understanding others' points of view and reasoning, and benefiting from the perspectives and collective experience of other pathologists. Working with fellows is also particularly rewarding. I've always enjoyed teaching, and through their questions, I discover what I don't know.

WHO IS YOUR ROLE MODEL AND WHY?

I have had several role models throughout my career, but the most notable have been the Chiefs under whom I have worked: Dr. Michael Graham, Dr. Jeffrey Barnard, and Dr. Ross Zumwalt. I have learned a great deal from each of them, and I strive to be like them. While they each approach various aspects of forensic pathology in different ways, I have learned invaluable "life lessons" and bits of wisdom from each of them that only come after many years of experience. I believe it is especially important in this field to identify such role models and benefit from their experience. It is far easier to succeed when you can stand on the shoulders of giants.

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

I used to compete in Ironman triathlon. Well, "compete" is a strong word since I am not particularly fast; the competition is more with yourself to see what you can push yourself to do. Over the last few years, I've just tried to stay in shape by taking time for some exercise—mostly running. In addition to keeping fit, it also helps to clear my mind and take my thoughts off of the office for a while. After all, the office is still going to be there tomorrow...

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

Austin is known for its barbecue and its tacos. My favorites are the pulled pork, smoked turkey, and the jalapeño cheddar sausage at Black's Barbecue, and anything on the menu at Torchy's; they have a featured taco each month. Also, although I've been out of New Mexico for a very long time now, I would give anything for a "#9+2" breakfast burrito from Golden Pride.