

Name: Tariq Marsh-Henry

Year: 2024

Medical School: St George's, University of London

Topic of Elective: Observational Medical Elective in Jamaica

Department: Forensic Pathology

Elective Report

Firstly, I'd like to thank the British Division of the International Academy Pathology for providing financial support toward my medical elective.

I spent 5 weeks on an observational elective in the Forensic Pathology department of the Institute of Forensic Science and Legal Medicine, based in Kingston, Jamaica. The aims of this elective were to 1) understand the death investigation process, the medicolegal autopsy and the role of the forensic pathologist, 2) to define and observe the stages of the postmortem process, and 3) to understand the role of the coroner. My role was primarily that of an observer, shadowing forensic pathologists as they conducted postmortem examinations. I also visited forensic laboratories specializing in ballistics, chemistry, and biology. The elective provided extensive exposure to postmortem examination techniques. Key learnings included protocols for thorough external and internal examinations, techniques for differentiating premortem and postmortem injuries, methods for tracing bullet trajectories in gunshot victims, and approaches to examining decomposed remains.

I observed several systematic challenges during the elective. The high caseload resulted in significant backlogs, while resource limitations necessitated compromises in investigative procedures. Delays between death occurrence and postmortem examination complicated case recall for police officers. I also appreciated the difficulties in victim identification, particularly in cases of advanced decomposition. Observations in specialized laboratories, including ballistics, chemistry, and biology, underscored the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in forensic science. This experience emphasized the complex nature of forensic investigations and the need for collaboration across different specialties.

I had the opportunity to consolidate what I learned, at the end of the elective period, by giving a presentation on the differences between sharp-force and blunt-force trauma to my supervisor and the mortuary staff.

Since this elective was mostly characterised by postmortem examinations, histopathology principles made up a majority of the period. The use of laboratory histopathology was not commonplace due to the nature of deaths and possibly due to resource limitations. This period has only affirmed my desire to pursue a career in forensic pathology as well as engaging in histopathological research.

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