

Olivia Gage

BDIAP student elective bursary 2024

Swansea University Medical School

Elective in forensic pathology, Glasgow and Edinburgh forensic pathology departments

I chose to undertake a four-week placement in forensic pathology for my final year elective placement. I had found histopathology an interesting speciality from my exposure to it in pre-clinical years and decided to research different careers in this speciality.

I chose Edinburgh and Glasgow for my placement, spending two weeks in each department. The Glasgow department is a large modern mortuary based on the hospital site, whereas Edinburgh is a public mortuary with strong university links. I was able to observe postmortems in both departments, discuss cases with forensic pathologists, and find out more about the histopathology and toxicology process, such as why samples are taken and the changes that pathologists look for.

I was also able to learn about the different reasons postmortems are completed – from unascertained deaths to suspicious deaths that require extensive investigation and preservation of evidence. I also learned that there are many differences between the Scottish and English legal systems, with the Scottish system working with the procurator fiscal, and the English system working with the coroner.

There were also a significant number of cases which were unascertained following dissection, pending histology and toxicology which may have given additional insight into the cause of death. I had previously not known that a certain number of deaths will remain unascertained even with these results.

I was also fortunate to learn about the other professionals that work in the mortuary, and as part of the wider investigative teams. Anatomical pathology technicians run the mortuary, assist with the process of the postmortem, and are highly skilled in specialist techniques. Detectives and crime scene photographers are also present when there has been a suspicious death. Seeing how all these highly skilled people work together showed me the often extensive work it takes to give people the dignity of establishing a cause of death.

I really enjoyed my placement at both Glasgow and Edinburgh departments. I was lucky to benefit from regular consultant teaching, see a wide variety of cases, and increase my understanding about the disease process, and the physical effect this has on the body. This elective has increased my interest in both histopathology and forensic pathology, and I hope to increase my exposure to these specialities in the future. It is a fascinating field.

On a personal level, working closely with the dead every day cannot help but make you consider what is important in your own life, which has been a profound lesson. It was a window into one of the most important yet most hidden aspects of the human experience. Every pronouncement of cause of death is a significant event, the

understanding of which will keep me in good stead throughout my future career in medicine.

Thank you to all of staff in both Glasgow and Edinburgh for welcoming me into the departments and taking the time to teach me about the work they are so passionate about, and to the BDIAP for their generosity and support with the elective bursary.