ANIL AGGRAWAL'S
Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology
The world's first online journal devoted entirely to forensic medicine and toxicology · Published 1 January and 1 July

VOL. 5, NO. 1 · JANUARY – JUNE 2004
Downloaded from www.anilaggrawal.com · ISSN 0972-8074 (Online) · https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_005_no_001/others/interview/goff.html

Interview with M. Lee Goff

"I don´t know" can be the best answer

M.B.: *Lee, is forensic entomology a science? Or what else is it?*

L.G.: I regard forensic entomology as applied science. The estimates we generate are based on results of carefully conducted experiments and field observations. These should be documented and published in peer-reviewed journals, subject to review and comment. They must not be "unpublished personal observations" as a general course. The results must be repeatable and documented.

As for all applied sciences, there is a measure of skill and "art" in the application of the data to a particular situation. This is the same for crop pest control or putting a satellite into orbit.

M.B.: *How did you as a biologist manage to start communication and co-operation about FE with medical people, the police, the coroner/forensic pathologist/chief medical examiner? Any hints for the next generation about bridging that cultural gap?*

L.G.: When I first began to interact with law enforcement and other forensic disciplines some 25 years ago, no one knew what forensic entomology was and I was regarded as being a "little strange." To a certain extent, I am still regarded as being a little strange, but the discipline is now accepted.

Acceptance was a long slow process. I was determined and kept contacting the agencies until they began to realize that I was not going to go away and, more significantly, the results were useful to their investigations.

For those beginning to work in the field it is important to have a realistic grasp of the role of the forensic entomologist. We are not law enforcement, with rare exceptions.

Stay within your area of expertise and do not attempt to inflate your own importance. Stay open to change. It will continue to happen and you need to be able to adapt.

M.B.: *You are now head of your own forensic program at Chaminade University in Hawai´i Which topics do you focus on there for the students?*

L.G.: My program here at Chaminade University leads to a BS degree in Forensic Sciences. We provide a strong background in the basic sciences and math combined with course work in criminal law.

Our forensic sciences courses include a core of general forensic sciences, physical forensic sciences and forensic biology, crime scene investigation, seminar and an internship served with an agency directly involved in forensic analyses. Electives include forensic photography, entomology, anthropology, computer crime and several criminal justice courses.

Our aim is to provide a general education in a wide spectrum of forensic science disciplines that will allow the student to specialize during graduate training.

M.B.: *What do you do if you calculate PMI but it does not match to what the police would prefer to hear, or found out yet?*

L.G.: My calculations are based on available data and are not dependent on the desires of the police. There are instances where I do not receive all the relevant information initially and an estimate may change based on those data. Never on the desires of an investigative agency. The estimates are based on an impartial analysis of evidence submitted. Not always popular but respected.

M.B.: *From your experience, which type of person will enjoy forensic entomology as a profession(al career)?*

L.G.: Based on my experiences, an individual wanting to work in forensic sciences in general has to be a little strange. We go to situations that most people avoid.

You must be able to distance yourself from the situation and view the evidence as evidence, not becoming emotionally involved.

You need to remain objective. You are looking for the truth of the situation and that is not as variable as lawyers would lead you to believe. You need to be someone who enjoys puzzles and does not want life to be routine. If you want a 9 to 5 job, this is not for you.

Life can be much like having Christmas every morning. You never know what will be waiting for you. You need to be a little nosey and not accept the easy answers all of the time.

You also need to remember that sometimes things are exactly what they appear to be. Develop a sense of humor. You'll need it.

M.B.: *Which of your own papers do you like best?*

L.G.: Actually my favorite paper would be the book I wrote: *A Fly for the Prosecution*. Primarily because I got to insert a little of myself into the situations. More that the publishers might have wanted but less than I started with.

Past that my first paper *A short note on distributions of chigger mites on islands in the North Central Pacific*. Not earth shattering, but I'm still amazed that I actually had nerve enough to write it, given my position as a technician in the Entomology Department at the Bishop Museum at the time.

M.B.: *Was there any scientific paper or observation that made your mind blow?*

L.G.: In retrospect, I was fascinated by S. J. Gould's work on the ideas on evolution. Can't say they changed my existence, but they stared me thinking in different ways. Past that, I had some wonderful conversations with him.

M.B.: *How did you manage to get your family, especially your daugther, enthusiastic about forensics?*

L.G.: My family is amazingly tolerant of my activities. Before I became interested in forensics, I worked on ectoparasitic mites. This meant trips to catch and skin rodents and other small mammals, collection of amphibians and reptiles. My wife went with me and helped in these projects. Forensics may have actually been a relief.

I don't keep those specimens in the freezer at home. My daughters grew up with my research. They went with me to visit the decomposition studies and based school projects on some of these.

I never pushed what I do on their futures. One has decided she enjoys it and is now working on her graduate degrees in forensic anthropology. The other has gone into communications and education, working with a pre-headstart program aimed at low income/recent immigrant families here in Hawaii. I'm very proud of both.

M.B.: *In one sentence, what is your basic guideline for forensic entomologists?*

L.G.: Follow the evidence and be objective in your analyses.

M.B.: *Anything else?*

L.G.: One of the major problems I have seen recently is in entomologists inflating their roles in the investigation. Too often I see individuals forgetting they are scientists and not law enforcement.

One should provide testimony only with one's own area of expertise and be certain not to extend opinions past the limits of the available evidence. Deviations from this do not serve the legal system or justice. Sometimes, in fact quite often, "I don't know" is the best answer in the world.

M.B.: *Thanks, Lee.*

L.G.: Aloha.