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Interview with Michael Tsokos

(Dr. Michael Tsokos is a lecturer of forensic pathology and legal medicine at the University of Hamburg, Germany, and the Police Academy of the City of Hamburg, Germany. He is the primary or senior author of more than 120 scientific publications in international peer-reviewed journals and the editor of a number of books dealing with topics of forensic pathology.

Michael Tsokos at work



In 1998 and 1999, Dr. Tsokos worked for a time with the exhumation and identification of mass grave victims in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo under the mandate of the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. In 2001, he was honored with the national scientific award of the German Society of Legal Medicine for his research on micromorphological and

molecular biological correlates of sepsis-induced lung injury in human autopsy specimens. In December 2004 and January 2005, Dr. Tsokos worked with other experts from national and international disaster victim identification teams in the region of Khao Lak/Thailand for the identification of the victims of the tsunami that struck South East Asia on the 26th December 2004.

He is a member of the International Academy of Legal Medicine and the German Identification Unit of the Federal Criminal Agency of Germany. Dr. Tsokos is assistant to the editor-in-chief of *Rechtsmedizin* (the official publication of the German Society of Legal Medicine), member of the Advisory Board of the *International Journal of Legal Medicine*, member of the Editorial Board of *Legal Medicine* and *Current Immunology Reviews* and European Editor of *Forensic Science, Medicine, and Pathology*.

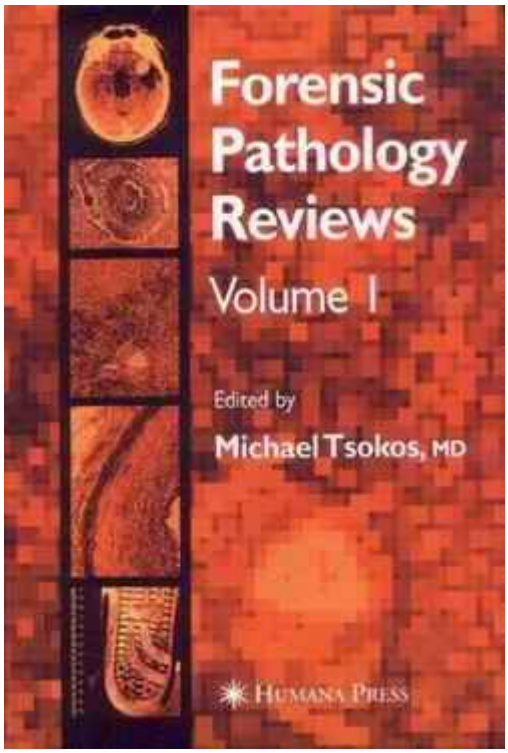
At a remarkably young age, he has achieved the status of an icon of Forensic Medicine. This journal reviewed his book Forensic Pathology Reviews Vol. 1 (Humana Press, 2004) in the current issue of our journal. The book was evaluated independently by four different reviewers from four different countries (from three continents - Asia, Europe and North America), and each reviewer praised the book.

We at the "Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology" naturally couldn't contain our curiosity to talk to him. The editor-in-chief approached him for an online interview and he graciously agreed. The interview was conducted for well over two months. Some excerpts.. ..)

Q. Please tell us something about your early life.

I was born in 1967 in Kiel, a medium-sized city in the far north of Germany. After finishing school, I did two years military service in Southern Germany and returned then to my hometown Kiel where I studied Medi! cine. After finishing university and my medical thesis at the Institute of Legal Medicine there, I did two years in the field of clinical pathology and then moved to Hamburg, Germany, where I am at the Institute of Legal Medicine for ten years now.

Cover Jacket of *Forensic Pathology Reviews, Vol. 1*, the bestseller by Michael Tsokos (Humana Press, 2004). Click cover to go to its review.



Q. Why did you take up forensic pathology as your specialization? Any special reason?

I was always interested in dealing with interesting and new subjects. In the field of Medicine, the subspeciality of forensic pathology offers both. I find it a great convenience never to get bored in my job, encountering new cases every day.

Q. Can you tell for our readers one of your remarkable cases - One which you would like to remember for long time?

I just returned from Khao Lak, Thailand, where I spent three weeks for identification of the victims of the tsunami that stru! ck South East Asia on Dec 26 last year. I worked with the German Victi m Disaster Identification Unit there, as I did back in 1998 in Bosnia and 1999 in Kosovo. I will never forget the scenario we saw when we arrived in Thailand on the 29th of December 2004 - thousands of dead bodies and a real task to go for, the identification.

Q. Keith Simpson wrote the bestseller "*Forty Years of Murder*", which was his autobiography with lots of interesting cases. Many other forensic pathologists have done similar experiments. Recently Chester Stern has written a book on Iain West's cases (*Dr. Iain West's casebook*). Do you plan to write such a book?

No such plans at the moment. Probably I will see a lot more the next decades, maybe a good question to ask me again in 30 years.

Q. Tell us something about your current book/previous books. How did you get inspiration for them? Was it difficult to find authors for them? One of the recent reviews (of your book) says that "as many as ten of the fifteen chapters were authored by German authors and two were written by the editor". Do you have anything to say to that?

At the moment I am involved in the Forensic Pathology Reviews series, published by Humana Press, Totowa, NJ. Vol. 1 has appeared in April 2004 and Vol. 2 in December 2004, Vol. 3 will appear in April 2005 and Vol. 4 is in press, scheduled for September 2005. The idea of the series is to fill a gap in the literature - reviews of forensic pathology topics written by well-renowned forensic

pathologists and scientists from all over the world. The sales numbers of the first two volumes proved true that we found a real niche for publications in the field of forensic pathology. Since the roots of forensic medicine and pathology are to be found in German speaking countries (the German Society of Legal Medicine had just the 100th anniversary in 2004), it is self-evident that a large number of authors comes and still will come in forthcoming volumes from Germany where forensic pathology has the longest tradition as a university discipline in the world. It was fascinating that, apart from one single person all those I asked to contribute a chapter did so and kept with the narrow deadlines.

Michael's Superlatives



Here is Michael Tsokos for you in a nutshell:

First award : Research Award 2001 from the German Society of Legal Medicine

First book: External Examination before Cremation (in German) appeared in 2000

Greatest inspiration: My grandmother who died in 1997

Greatest love of my life: My wife Jenny

I am passionate about: Fast cars

I am superstitious about: 23 (my lucky number)

I don't compromise with: Being condescending towards other people

I hate: Hangovers

I look forward to: Birth of more sons of mine

I Love: My job.

I would like to be marooned on a desert island with: My wife.

If I could change one thing about my family, it would be: Spend more time with them.

If I could change one thing about myself, it would be: Become more patient

If I could change one thing about the world, it would be: Terrorism

My biggest fear: Dying without fulfilling all future plans

My Birthday: 23rd Jan 1967.

My current state of mind: Not too bad.

My favorite bedroom line: My wife.

My favorite food: Hamburgers.

My favorite one-liner: All my e-mail correspondents.

My favorite journey/holiday: Lasting forever.

My greatest extravagance: My car.

My greatest necessity: Coffee.

My Hero: Achilles.

My most treasured possession: My dog.

My sex appeal: 8.6 out of ten (??).

My spice: Salt and Pepper.

My strength: My brain.

My wildest fantasy: My wife 5 years earlier.

Place Of Birth: Kiel, Germany.

What touches me most: Sad children.

When or where was I happiest: Day of birth of my son Titus.

Where do I see myself five years down the line: Still sitting at my PC at nighttime.

Who or what would I like to be born as in my next life: Dog of Michael Tsokos

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Q. Your current affiliation?

Institute of Legal Medicine, Dept. of Forensic Pathology, University of Hamburg, Germany

Q. Did you inherit the love of science/writing from your parents? How many children do you have? Would you be happy if they took up Forensic Pathology as a profession? What are they doing now?

I have one son, his name is Titus Noel Tsokos (TNT), he is three years old. I leave it to him what profession he will choose one day, as long as he is lucky with it.

Q. What do you love most (besides your professional work and writing of course)?

Travelling, walking my dog, going to a playground with my son.

Q. Your favorite dish, book, movie, star, person?

movie: Gladiator with Russel Crowe.

Q. What do you dislike most?

People talking too much without offering results of what they promise to fulfill.

Q. What do you consider as your biggest achievement in life? What has been your biggest failure/ disappointment?

No comments.

Q. If God asked you choose your profession again, what would it be and why?

Forensic Pathologist. Because I truly love the specialty.

Q. Have you ever traveled to India, or to Indian subcontinent? Would you like to visit, if such an opportunity arose?

No, but I would love to see the country and learn to know the people and about the culture.

Q. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be, and why?

I would (and I try to) be more patient.

Q. Which living person do your admire most? Which person in entire history? Why?

Professor Klaus Püschel, my academic teacher for the immense knowledge in forensic medicine and pathology.

Q. In one line, how would you best describe yourself?

Dynamic dynamite.

Q. Any awards?

Research award from the German Society of Legal Medicine in 2001 for my molecularbiological research on postmortem sepsis diagnostics.

Q. You say 23 is your lucky number (I realize it is your birthday too). What special achievements did you have when you were 23 years of age?

At the age of 23 I was working as a medical student on my thesis at the Institute of Legal Medicine in Kiel, Germany.

Q. In what way did your grandmother inspire you?

She told me a lot of general knowledge and about classic literature.

Q. You look forward to more sons. Do you not love daughters?

I have nothing against daughters but I love to play the games boys like to play with my son.

Q. If you were marooned on a desert island, who/what would you like to be marooned with and why?

My wife, because she is the person I laugh with the most - in any given situation.

Michael Tsokos in his study



Q. What do you do first thing in the morning?

Have a coffee.

Q. And the last thing at night?

Check my e-mails.

Q. If you were allowed a choice to live in one era of time (past, present or future), which one will you chose and why?

Old Roman times.

Q. What do you do in your spare time? Your hobbies, interests?

Play with my son, walk my dog.

Q. If a youngster of about 12-13 years wanted to take up forensic pathology as a career, how should he proceed?

Keep your eyes open to everything and learn as much about society and people before you do this as your profession.

Q. Your favorite authors/books?

A German author Jürgen Kehrer, he wrote a lot of great criminal stories (all in German, sorry).

Q. Any message for our readers?

Mortui vivos docent (We learn from the dead for the living).

Dr. Tsokos can be approached via E-mail at mtsokos@web.de. The review of his book Forensic Pathology Reviews, Vol. 1 *appears in the same issue. Readers wanting to visit this review may want to the linked page (page015).*

Interview appearing in the previous issue Interviews : Collective Index Interviews in our sister publication : Collective Index