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. 6, NO. 1
Downloaded from www.anilaggrawal.com · ISSN 0972-8074 (Online) · https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_006_no_001/reviews/tb/page005.html

Book Reviews: Technical Books Section



A VISUAL TOUR OF FORENSIC PATHOLOGY

Rating : 10
★★★★★★★★★★ (10/5)

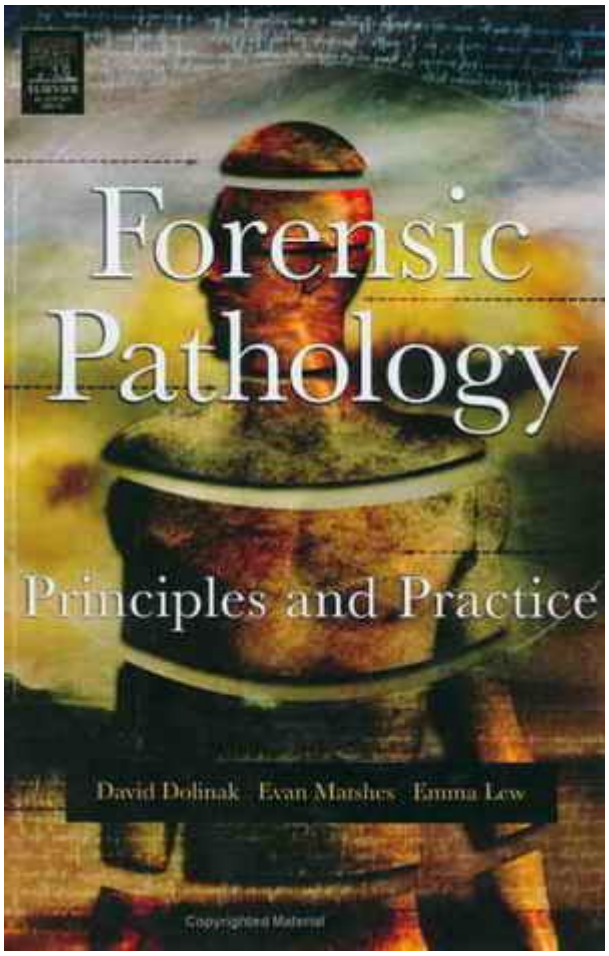
Forensic Pathology : Principles and Practice (1st edition), by David Dolinak, Evan Matshes, Emma O. Lew. Hard Bound, 11.2" x 8.7" x 1.8"

Elsevier Academic Press, 30 Corporate Drive, Suite 400, Burlington, MA 01803, USA. Publication Date: April 20, 2005, xxiv+690 pages, ISBN 0-12-219951-0. Price £145.00, $220.00, Eur 210.00, ¥26,148.00. illus., bibliog., subject index.

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It has always been my belief that subjects as intensely visual as forensic pathology can best be learnt and practised by actual dissections and observations. For this reason, books on forensic pathology that are richly illustrated are always a better source of learning than the ones that tend to impart information in simple didactic way. Forensic medicine community has seen a number of new books published during the last few years. Not all of them have been as richly illustrated as one would like.

The book under review is what one would always like to have on one's desk. It is informative, factual, well-referenced, exhaustive and extremely well illustrated. It immediately grasps one's attention not only because it gives practical tips throughout, but also because of its rich and profuse illustrations. How richly is the book illustrated can be gauged by the fact that there are a total of more than 1800 photographs (all in full color) scattered over 671 pages of text - about 3 photographs per page!

The book has been edited by David Dolinak, Deputy Chief Medical Examiner at the Dallas County Medical Examiner Department, Evan Matshes, an adjunct professor in the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology at the University of Saskatchewan and Emma Lew, Deputy Chief Medical Examiner at the Miami-Dade County Medical Examiner Department. They have assembled together a team of six other experts; together the nine of them have written a total of 31 chapters. We already know the team of Dolinak and Matshes through their earlier atlas of Forensic neuropathology, and the moment I saw their name on the book, I knew I was in for some more good educational stuff. Most chapters in this book deal with common day-to-day problems, such as asphyxia, firearm wounds, traffic accidents, calculating the time since death and so on. A few are exceptional, such as the ones on "acute psychiatric and emotional deaths" and "forensic photography". Because of the profuse

illustrations, the book often gives the appearance of an atlas, rather than a text as we ordinarily understand. This is a good feature, because - as I stated earlier - forensic pathology is an intensely visual subject and can best be understood by seeing.

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Much of the value of this book lies in illustrative photographs such as these, and the subsequent "take home messages". The scene here indicates a possible homicide, but a meticulor investigation proves it to be a case of accidental death due to drug abuse. See accompanying text for details. These photographs appear on pages 33-34. Click photographs to enlarge in a new window.



There are some other interesting features in this book too, which set it apart from other run-of-the-mill kind of texts. One which I especially liked - and am sure, most others will like too - is a feature called "take home message". You can read the text and cases, and then the editors will tend to drive home the point through this feature. This feature should be most useful for younger pathologists

and those in training for whom this book is an absolute must. Consider this case given on pages 33-34. A young man's body is found naked on the sofa in the living room of his one-bedroom apartment. The furniture and various other objects in the house are strewn all around. There are some minor injuries on the body too. All this may lead one - especially a young forensic pathologist - to conclude that he could be dealing with a case of homicide. But through meticulous reasoning, the authors prove this to be a case of accident. Cocaine metabolites are found in the body, which indicate that the young man was perhaps in delirium due to cocaine. Furniture strewn around the room and minor injuries on his body could be attributed to this delirium. The point however is driven home by the fact that the rectal temperature of the body is found to be 92 degrees Fahrenheit, while the environmental temperature was just 88 degrees Fahrenheit. This point is driven home by the concluding section where the authors give the "take home message". And of course the message is that if one sees a scene consistent with bizarre behaviour associated with an excited delirium, it might be useful to take a rectal temperature and ambient temperature (with a watch to record the date and time!). This will document hyperthermia associated with cocaine use as well as hyperthermia due to other causes.

The book is full of such practical tips throughout. To my mind the two most valuable features of this book are its rich and profuse illustrations and its practical tips. Most current books are deficient in these.

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Although all chapters are good and informative, I especially enjoyed the chapters on forensic osteology, forensic odontology, forensic photography, forensic neuropathology and firearm injuries. All these had something unique to tell us. Although complete books on forensic photography have been written, not all of us have the time to go through them. If you are short on reading time, consult the forensic photography section in this book, and you would know most of the essential information. A number of photography pitfalls are illustrated along with pictures. Some of these are - the picture not in focus, dark or inadequate lighting and glare, bloody specimens (this is one of the most common pitfalls in my experience), incorrectly labelled photograph, poor or confusing orientation, background distractions (another extremely common pitfall with most of us) and body or lesion not centred.

This series of photographs (at page 529) illustrates several ways in which postmortem staining can develop. Pictures like this are scattered throughout the book, which make it an excellent teaching guide. Read accompanying text for details of this picture. Click picture to enlarge in a new window.













This book can be heartily recommended not only to trainees and younger pathologists, who obviously would benefit greatly from this book, but also to senior pathologists if only to re-alert them to certain common pitfalls. Certainly everyone would get to see a number of unique cases irrespective of the level of his experience. I have been conducting autopsies for the last 30 years, and yet I saw a number of pictures, which I had never seen before. Take for instance post-mortem staining. I have seen them everywhere; under the breasts, underneath the groin, on hands, underneath the chin, almost everywhere. But I was amazed to see the post-mortem lividity pictures

in this book (pages 528 through 532 - There are a total of 23 pictures on post-mortem lividity alone!). The most amazing were the ones where you see partial staining on the right hand and another on the soles. The former gives an appearance almost as if something were casting a shadow on the hand. In reality it is the pressure of the body which prevented post-mortem lividity from developing on part of the hand because it was buried underneath the body. What better way could there be to teach a youngster, how pressure prevents post-mortem lividity from developing. Similarly the second photograph shows the post-mortem lividity on the soles of a maid who had died in a standing position. The photograph shows how lividity does not develop at pressure points.

Besides pathologists at whom this book is mainly aimed, it should also prove useful for police officers, coroners, magistrates and all other law enforcement officers. Illustrative photographs should prove useful to this section.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and this book is going to my companion for the rest of my life.

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