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. 14, NO. 2
Downloaded from www.anilaggrawal.com · ISSN 0972-8074 (Online) · https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_014_no_002/reviews/tb/page002.html

Book Reviews: Technical Books Section

...ESSENTIAL READING ...The book's simplistic and practical approach, its avoidance of technical terminology where possible, makes it useful even for investigators, police officers, lawyers and judges, who have a minimal understanding to technical terms. I would imagine, even a layman would enjoy it. For professional forensic pathologists like me, it is a source of unbound joy and learning.... Rating : 10.0...

Spitz and Fisher's Medicolegal Investigation of Death: Guidelines for the Application of Pathology to Crime Investigation, 4th Ed, edited by Werner U. Spitz, Daniel J. Spitz. Hardcover, 11.3" x 8.9" x 2.3". Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 2600 South First Street, Springfield, Illinois 62704. Publication Date 2006. 1358 pages, 1420 illustrations, 49 tables, ISBN-10: 0398075441; ISBN-13: 978-0398075446. Price $129.95.

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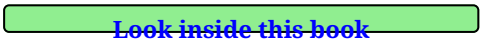

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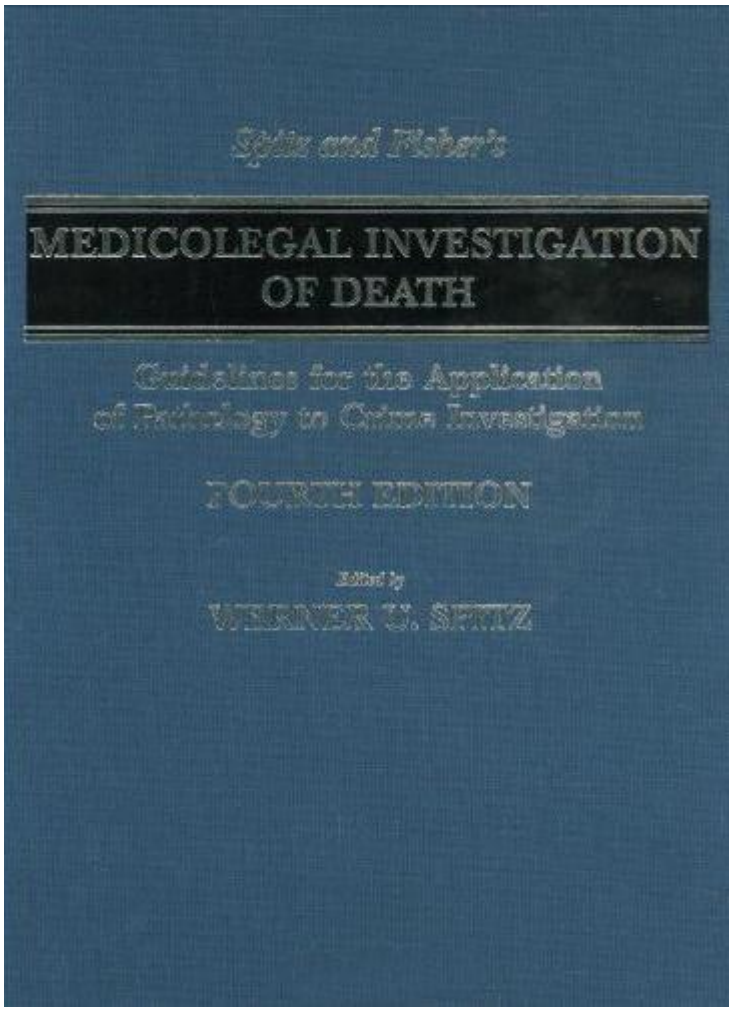

We have all grown up reading the classic Spitz and Fisher - so much so, that somewhere it has become part of our subconscious. The moment we think of forensic pathology, the name Spitz and Fisher jumps in our minds. It was thus a moment of great joy to go through the latest edition of this now classic book.

This book was first published in 1973 with Werner Spitz and Russell Fisher, the joint editors of the book. 2nd edition came in 1980, and 3rd in 1993 - this time without Fisher, as he passed away in 1987. A new edition of this book, thus has been coming almost every 10 years or so. Spitz was a student of Fisher and he describes how he first met Fisher as he arrived from Europe to meet him at the office of the Chief Medical Examiner of Maryland:

"Reluctantly, I got out of the cab and entered the building. I went to the second floor and announced myself to the secretary, Dorothy, who yelled, "Russ, Werner Spitz is here!" I peered into the office and saw a man covered in dust and sweat with his sleeves rolled up, and the knot of his tie in the middle of his chest. He was standing on a ladder, working on an air conditioner. This was the eminent Dr. Russell S. Fisher".[1]

Despite being such a down-to-earth man, Russell was a great teacher and taught thousands of students all over the world throughout his life. The book under review - although without his editorship now - carries his stamp of erudition all through. Spitz has edited the latest edition with his son Daniel, who after working for several years in Florida at the Dade and Hillsborough Counties Medical Examiner's Offices, has joined him in Michigan. His relocation has enabled to work on the book together.

4th edition - the book under review - has been completely redone. Eleven new chapters and sections have been added. There is an overall updated and expanded text and hundreds of new illustrations. And this has been made possible by including several new contributors; there are a total of 35 contributors in the current edition.

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The illustrations are all in black and white like in its previous editions. Lack of color illustrations may confound some readers, especially those of the younger generation, who like everything in color. However the editors have stuck to the old format for very good reasons. Such an approach undoubtedly reduces costs, but a more practical reason is that it promotes neutrality, without playing on emotions. Furthermore for an astute observer, the lack of color is generally not significant.

...The current edition has 25 chapters ranging from such wide variety of topics as history and development of forensic medicine (chapter 1) to selected procedures at autopsy (chapter 25). Chapter on Examination of crime scene now covers new topics including bloodstain Pattern Interpretation (written by the well-known expert Herbert Leon MacDonell), biological Evidences and other trace evidences. The chapter on "time of death and changes after death" now covers dedicated sections on forensic Thanatochemistry [estimation of TSD from fluid chemistry] and forensic Entomology...

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We now have an entire new section on DNA under the chapter on "identification of human remains". One of the most useful chapters is on "forensic odontology", which has now been vastly expanded. It now contains sections on "Bite Mark Identification" (written by Richard R. Souviron who has written an entire book on forensic odontology on his own) and the use of Digital Analysis in Bite Mark (written by C. Michael Bowers with a colleague. Bowers is a known expert in the field having written a book on forensic odontology himself).

There are chapters on "sudden and unexpected death from natural causes in adults", "investigation of deaths in childhood" and "trauma and disease". All forms of injury including "blunt force injury", "sharp force injury", "injury by gunfire", "thermal injuries", "electrical and lightning injuries" and "CNS injuries" have been dealt with in adequate detail.

The two toxicology related chapters that impressed me most were "investigation of deaths from drug abuse" and "forensic aspects of alcohol".

What I would call bonus chapters are "microscopic forensic pathology" (written by the well-known expert in the field Joshua Perper), forensic radiology (written by B.G Brogdon himself who has several books to his credit entirely devoted to forensic radiology).

Overall I got a feeling that this book is a joint effort - a meeting point - of several experts in their own fields. That the editors have been able to amass such wealth of expertise at one place is an achievement in itself.

The book is primarily meant for pathologists, forensic pathologists and pathology residents but so simple is its language that even non-technical persons can easily understand and enjoy it. The remarkable illustrations that it carries doubles it up as a useful atlas. We are reproducing some below for the benefit of readers. This sampling is from all across the book. Click all pics to enlarge.

Time of Death an



From Chapter III - part 3-Forensic entomology [p 167]

890



Would non-technical persons - perhaps even a layman - be interested in reading this book? Well, surely - because of its easy style, and interesting case histories. Forensic science and medicine has now become very popular among the lay people, thanks to the popularity of shows depicting medical legal death investigation such as, Quincy, CSI, Crossing Jordan, and Court TV, to name but a few. Now even lay people want to know about forensic pathology from an authentic source - and what better and more authentic source than the classic Spitz and Fisher!

The book's simplistic and practical approach, its avoidance of technical terminology where possible, makes it useful even for investigators, police officers, lawyers and judges, who have a minimal understanding to technical terms. I would imagine, even a layman would enjoy it. For professional forensic pathologists like me, it is a source of unbound joy and learning.

References

(1) Spitz WU. A tribute to the late Russell S. Fisher. *Am J Forensic Med Pathol*. 1988 Dec;**9(4)**:355-6.

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Editor's recommendation. This book is recommended by the editor.