

A Review of the Fulton County Medical Examiner's Workshop 2003 NLC in Atlanta

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I was lucky to receive the South Carolina ticket to attend a special educational symposium at the 2003 HOSA National Leadership Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, this past June. While in Atlanta I had the rare opportunity to tour the Fulton County medical examiner's office and observe two autopsies.

Upon arrival at the Medical Examiner's office we joined Dr. Heninger in a room where he instructed us on the steps taken to prepare a death certificate. He then showed us pictures from three different cases. The first photos were of a 27 year-old male who was killed in a car accident in the rain the previous day. The pictures were of his truck and the external damage to his body. The next set of pictures were of a 57-year-old female who was also killed in a car accident in the rain the previous day. The pictures showed the car in a very large ditch as well as her body in the passenger seat of her vehicle. The last set of pictures were of a man that had been decaying in his house for a week until his neighbors complained of the smell and called the police. The pictures showed water and insects all over his body. He had fallen out of the bed. The purpose of taking pictures at the scene is to give the medical examiners a sense of what happened at the site of the accident and to help decide which type of autopsy is appropriate.

After viewing the pictures, we went into a small room with a window where we could see the examination in progress. There was a television set for the people in the back who could not see through

the window. First the examiners recorded the external injuries found on the body. They then left the examination room to properly dress for the internal examination. When they returned, one of the examiners removed the organs and placed them on the table for the other examiner to weigh and dissect to determine if any pathology was present. They then cut off a piece of the organ to have available to examine under the microscope. After this procedure with every organ, the dissection of the skull began. They removed the brain and looked at each section for damage. In both of the cases we observed, there was trauma to the head. After they finished examining the body, all of the organs which were now in plastic bags were replaced into the body and the body cavity was sutured closed. The bodies were sprayed with cleaner and allowed to sit for a couple of minutes before being rinsed with water in preparation for the morgue.

When the examination was finished Dr. Heninger showed us a Power Point of the titles of their employees, the reasons autopsies are performed, and what the medical examiner does when the autopsy is done. There is a large amount of paperwork to be completed. Sometimes the medical examiner is required to testify in court about the autopsy findings.

It was really interesting to visit one of the busiest medical examiner's offices in the nation. Even though every case was a tragedy, it was wonderful to get to see and experience an awesome anatomy lesson. I know that I will never forget that morning in Atlanta!

