

quest WRITER

When the ten o'clock news comes on at our house, it is frequently accompanied by the question, "What county did that happen in?" If the answer is Pierce County, then the news coverage provides a preview of part of tomorrow's work. My name is Rob Dudra, and I am an autopsy technician for the Pierce County Medical Examiner's office.

It used to be more difficult for people to understand my responsibilities, but popular television shows like 'Crossing Jordan' and 'C.S.I.' have brought the viewing public more information about forensic medicine. The Medical Examiner's office investigates suspicious, traumatic and unexplained deaths that occur anywhere in Pierce County. Essentially, our office works to determine and report to the public the cause and manner of deaths and to determine identification of the individual. Each determination of death is made by Dr. John Howard, M.D., chief medical examiner, or Dr. Roberto Ramoso, M.D., associate medical examiner. Each doctor has specialized training in pathology and forensic medicine. There is a 13-year minimum of post-high school education to become a forensic pathologist.

Since the doctors do not witness the actual death, the determination of death is based on information about circumstances and events prior to the death (ante-mortem) and evidence of and about the body after death (post-mortem). My responsibilities

are to assist with the post-mortem examination of the body at the Medical Examiner's facility. I work under the direct supervision of Dr. Howard or Dr. Ramoso.

Once it is determined to have our office take jurisdiction of a death, an investigative staff member typically responds to the scene, does a field investigation, and reports to the medical examiner on call. If the medical examiner determines that the body should be brought to our facility, the decedent is transported, logged in, and stored in our main cooler. A case file containing field reports is initiated by the investigator and submitted for doctor review.

As each staff member arrives in the morning, his focal point is the case board. About four months ago, a print of a "smiley face" button appeared on the board (see photo next page). It indicates the celebration of "no cases" or "no new cases added" - the people



Rob Dudra is an autopsy technician in the Medical Examiner's office.

of Pierce County are alive and well! We smile. Unfortunately, very often a good portion of the 16 spaces on the board will have names written on them, and I have seen the board full twice.

After a brief morning conference between the doctors and tech staff, an order and extent of examination is determined and preparations are made. If the case load on the board exceeds staff and time available, the "Howardism" of "They are dead; we are not. Let's keep it that way" is applied to pace ourselves for safety, and some cases will be continued the next morning.

The root meaning of the word "autopsy" is "to see for one's self." However, the autopsy procedure is not the dissection of the body alone. It is a layer by layer examination outward to inward: on, of and under the clothing; on, of and under the skin; the state of the relationship of the internal organs; the state of each vital organ, grossly and microscopically. I have assisted over 2,000 autopsies of a broad variety of trauma. The biological states of the bodies have ranged from within hours of death to years after death. We

also deal with skeletal remains. Most non-traumatic autopsies require one to two hours. Rarely, homicide cases will be less than three hours. Multiple wound homicides have lasted eight to nine continuous hours. My responsibilities during an autopsy include radiography (X-rays), photography, personal property preservation and inventory, evidence collection, preservation and inventory, dissection, gross

reconstruction, and fingerprinting. As experience is gained, you become a second set of eyes and a second mind during the examination.

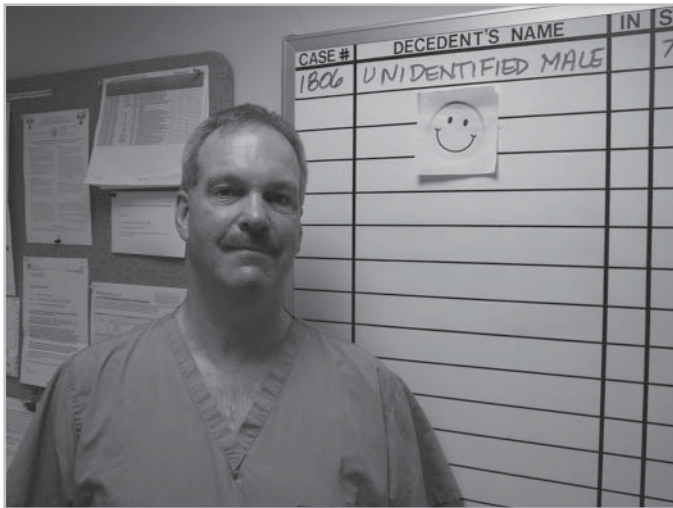
Care for the equipment and the autopsy suite also is a shared

Continued next page

Guest Writer continued
responsibility. The autopsies are performed in a non-sterile, surgical environment.

Adjacent to and separate from the main autopsy suite is the Special Procedures room. This room is a secured, self-contained and isolated autopsy suite. It is used for known highly infectious cases, advanced decomposition cases particularly involving insect activity, and skeletal remains reconstruction (forensic anthropology). It also serves as a drying room for fluid-soaked evidence items.

Now that DNA is a common tool for identification, we receive regular requests for samples to be used in



Rob Dudra has been working for the Pierce County Medical Examiner's office for over 11 years.

proving paternity. I answer procedural questions and help transmit samples to the designated laboratory.

My job is totally related to case load. Therefore, advance preparation of the facility and supplies is imperative, daily and long term. Our coolers will accommodate the bodies of 55 decedents. We have a disaster response plan, periodic specific training, and supplies on hand in the event of mass tragedy.

Twice each year for a two-month period, we receive a pathology resident from the Madigan Army Medical

Center (MAMC). Each doctor receives training in forensic pathology and autopsies from our staff. It is gratifying to me to contribute to their knowledge about forensic autopsies and specific dissection techniques. This arrangement exists due to an exchange of services contract by which MAMC performs our microscopic slide preparations throughout the year.

A consistent question from family, friends and acquaintances is, "How can I do my job with all of the death and trauma involved?" I respond with the body, soul and spirit approach. I have to keep physically able, so I work out with a personal trainer. Each death means a loss to someone. I maintain

compassion for loved ones left behind while being able to perform in objective and scientific mode. Often it comes to mind to pray for the comfort of those left behind and grieving, and I do. Lastly, I rely heavily on my Christian faith for understanding death. It keeps me balanced.

Also, since I work in an environment that reflects destructive violence and trauma, I involve my off time in constructive activities like building fishing boats and residential design.

I have been a part of the Medical Examiner's office for over 11 years, and I intend to continue for many more. I enjoy the people I work with, and I enjoy the work. It is never monotonous. Please visit the Pierce County Medical Examiner's office Web site for more detailed information and photos. If you have a question (nonspecific to a case), then please feel free to e-mail me.

Rob Dudra, Medical Examiner's office



Fall Programs

Sept. 9

Registration begins for boys and girls **Youth Indoor Soccer** for ages 4 to 7 at Lakewood Community Center. Cost is \$30 per child and registration time is from 5:30 - 6:30 p.m. Games are played Oct. 10 thru Nov. 20 at the center. Call 253-798-4753 for more information.

Oct. 1

Registration deadline for **Adult Indoor Whiffle Ball League** offered at Lakewood Community Center. A team consists of four players who want to have some fun and bat the whiffle ball around the gym. Cost is \$188/team and includes 12 games played Oct. 19 - Dec. 4 on weeknights or Saturday afternoons. Call 253-798-4703.

Nov. 6

Boys and girls ages 8 to 12 **Basketball League** registration begins. Register at Lakewood Community Center from 5:30 - 6:15 p.m. Cost is \$35 per participant. For more details call 253-798-4703.

Nov. 29

Register now to learn to **ski or snowboard** with the Pierce County Parks program at Crystal Mountain. Lessons and transportation for the eight-week program are \$239 per person. Bus pick-up locations include

Continued next page