Trainees and COVID-19: A Call to Arms

Andrea Gilbert, DO

University of Texas Health San Antonio

Author Address and Correspondence:

Andrea Gilbert, D.O.

University of Texas Health San Antonio

Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine

7703 Floyd Curl Drive, Mail Code 7750

San Antonio, TX 78229-3900

Address for Reprints:

Andrea Gilbert, D.O.

University of Texas Health San Antonio

Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine

7703 Floyd Curl Drive, Mail Code 7750

San Antonio, TX 78229-3900

Author Address and Correspondence:

gilbertar@uthscsa.edu

Phone: 210-450-8369

Fax: 210-567-6729

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest or competing financial interests to report. No funding was received on behalf of this manuscript. This manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not currently under consideration for publication. Approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was not sought out as this is a letter to the Editor that does not include patient information.

This article is made available via the PMC Open Access Subset for unrestricted re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic or until permissions are revoked in writing. Upon expiration of these permissions, PMC is granted a perpetual license to make this article available via PMC and Europe PMC, consistent with existing copyright protections.

Dear Editor,

Like all humans, pathologists and pathology trainees are subject to the human condition of fearing the unknown. In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, we are currently in an unprecedented time with many unknowns that has caused some autopsy services to implement, or at least consider, not performing autopsies on persons with known COVID-19 infection.

I would like to share with the readers of the American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology a letter that I drafted to my pathology residents in response to their concerns regarding the performance of autopsies on known COVID-19 positive patients. As I am sure that other autopsy directors are hearing similar concerns, I hope that you might also share this letter with your readers if it might be of any help.

Dear Pathology Residents,

I understand that many of you are concerned about the infectiousness of COVID-19 in regards to the autopsy service. I would like to take a moment to address this.

It is only natural to be worried about your personal health and the health of your loved ones in these unprecedented times. But, please allow me to remind you that you have persevered through similar dangers in the past. Many, if not all, of you have worked with patients or samples infected with tuberculosis, HIV, and influenza. COVID-19 level of precautions are on par with

tuberculosis - the major difference being that TB has a sense of familiarity whereas there is the element of the unknown with the coronavirus.

It is part of the human condition to fear the unknown. But recall that physicians have stood tall on the front lines of similar epidemics - HIV/AIDS, bird flu, swine flu / H1N1... In particular, during the HIV/AIDS epidemic many suggested that pathologists should not put themselves at risk by performing autopsies on victims of this disease. Yet the autopsy information procured by pathologists during that time gave the world an immeasurable amount of invaluable information about not just AIDS, but diseases in general, the immune system, neoplasia, virology, epidemiology, and the list goes on. As history has shown, and as forensic pathologists know too well, study of affected persons in the midst of an epidemic can arm the world's scientists and healthcare providers against the disease.

We have a chance to demonstrate how pathologists are involved, in so many ways, in this national and global fight. We have a chance to stand on the frontline side-by-side with our clinical colleagues who are coughed on, sneezed on, vomited on, and spit upon and show that we are ready and willing to take on the same risks as they do every day. We are called to honor the oath we made on day 1 that we will help patients and their families, not just in times of ease, but also, and especially, in times of struggle.

You stand poised to make a difference in our common understanding of this disease, one patient at a time and one autopsy at a time. I encourage you to not to approach your autopsy responsibilities with fear and avoidance, but utilize this opportunity to give answers/closure to our

patients' families, while also providing valuable information to the clinicians and scientists in our institutions, our nation, and the world to help win this fight against a common enemy.

It is a privilege in this time of need to rise to our professional standards. We will not perpetuate the stereotype that pathologists sit safe and sound behind their desks while our clinical colleagues in the ICUs and clinics literally come face to face with this disease every day. I encourage you to join your physician colleagues and not back down from your duties out of fear. You are Pathologists-in-Training and autopsies are an essential part of your education and our service to the community. You have a job to do and I know you can do it well. Now is the time to step up. I encourage you to join our clinical colleagues on the front line and actively engage in this global emergency with calm, rationality, and maybe even a little creativity.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Andrea Gilbert, D.O.

Director of Autopsy Pathology

Assistant Professor, Neuropathology

University Health System and

University of Texas Health San Antonio

Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine

7703 Floyd Curl Drive, Mail Code 7750

San Antonio, TX 78229-3900