

SPECIAL COMMUNICATION

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Cyril H. Wecht, M.D., J.D., Honoree of the 1996 Career Achievements Award, New York Society of Forensic Sciences at Lehman College



FIG. 1—Cyril H. Wecht, M.D., J.D. receiving the 1996 New York Society of Forensic Sciences (NYSFS) career achievements award for his contributions to forensic pathology and legal medicine from NYSFS President, Dr. Mark L. Taff, on April 17, 1996.

In honor of the 65th meeting of the New York Society of Forensic Sciences (NYSFS) at Lehman College, Bronx, New York on April 17, 1996, Dr. Cyril H. Wecht was the recipient of the 6th career achievements award for his contributions to forensic pathology and legal medicine (Fig. 1). About 50 members of the organization turned out for the dinner and lecture in honor of Dr. Wecht.

The following introductory remarks were said as part of the gala event: "This evening, we are honored to have with us Dr. Cyril H. Wecht who received his medical degree from the University of Pittsburgh and his J.D. degree from the University of Maryland. He is certified by the American Board of Pathology in anatomic, clinical, and forensic pathology and is a Fellow of the College of American Pathologists and the American Society of Clinical

Pathologists. Dr. Wecht is currently the Chairman of the Department of Pathology and President of the medical staff at St. Francis Central Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He is also very active as a medical-legal consultant, author, and lecturer. He is also the Coroner of Allegheny County (Pittsburgh). He is an adjunct professor at the University of Pittsburgh Schools of Medicine, Dental Medicine, and Graduate School of Public Health and at Duquesne University Schools of Law, Pharmacy, and Health Sciences. He has served as President of the American College of Legal Medicine and the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. Dr. Wecht is presently the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the American Board of Legal Medicine and the American College of Legal Medicine Foundation. He has authored 360 professional publications; an editorial board member of more than 20 national and international medical-legal and forensic scientific publications; editor of *Legal Medicine*, an annual book since 1969 (Butterworth); editor of 4-volume set, *Forensic Sciences* (Mathew Bender); co-editor of the two 3-volume sets, *Handling Soft Tissue Injury Cases* (Michie), and *Preparing and Winning Medical Negligence Cases*

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(Michie). He has organized and conducted post-graduate Medical-Legal Seminars in more than 50 countries in his capacity as Director of the Pittsburgh Institute of Legal Medicine. He has performed 13,000 autopsies and supervised, signed off, or been consulted on approximately 25,000 other autopsies. Dr. Wecht has appeared as a guest on several national TV and radio shows, discussing various medicolegal and forensic scientific subjects, including medical malpractice, drug abuse, the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and the death of Elvis Presley. These cases, as well as those involving Mary Jo Kopechne, Sunny von Bulow, Jean Harris, Dr. Jeffrey MacDonald, the Waco Branch Davidian Fire, and others are discussed from the perspective of Dr. Wecht's own professional involvement in his book, *Cause of Death*, and his forthcoming book, *Grave Secrets*, scheduled for publication in September, 1996.

Following the opening remarks, Dr. Wecht gave a very erudite discussion of his professional and personal philosophies concerning the past and present practice of forensic medicine. He began his talk with a brief historical overview of the coroner's system, including the advantages and disadvantages of such a death investigation system. He then turned his attention to cases described in *Cause of Death* and *Grave Secrets*, including the recent murder trial of O. J. Simpson. Discussion of high-profile cases was used

to outline the existant problems in the present practice of forensic pathology. Emphasis was placed on the dichotomy between modern technology and the substandard practice of death investigation in many parts of the country. Dr. Wecht concluded that, although the rest of medicine has progressed over the past 20 years, the medical examiner's system has regressed in some respects. Wecht attributed the bulk of the blame to the substandard quality of autopsies. He recommended that pathologists make a concerted effort to perform original autopsies properly, reducing the chances of misinterpretation, second autopsies, and exhumations.

Dr. Wecht also addressed the adversarial system and emphasized that differences of opinion are to be expected in the courtroom. He also explained that prosecutors have a tendency to be politically motivated and sometimes vindictive towards defense witnesses who are just doing their job as private medical expert consultants. Dr. Wecht concluded his remarks by saying that medicolegal and forensic scientific educational courses must continue to address the needs of forensic pathologists and the public. His final admonition was that medicolegal investigative offices (coroner and medical examiner) should function as "medical ombudsman." They should be autonomous, independent governmental agencies, not an arm of the prosecution or any other governmental office that might control or unduly influence their actions and opinions.