

BOOK REVIEW

Gregory G. Davis,¹ M.D., M.S.P.H.

Review of: *Color Atlas of the Autopsy*

REFERENCE: Wagner SA. Color atlas of the autopsy. CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL, 2004, 245 pp.

Dr. Wagner wrote his *Color Atlas of the Autopsy* for crime scene investigators, law enforcement officials, and other professionals who interact with forensic pathologists during the course of an autopsy. Individuals who lack formal medical training have many questions upon seeing their first autopsy, and *Color Atlas of the Autopsy* attempts to answer these questions by capturing the process of autopsy examination as it unfolds.

The book begins with a brief overview that nicely shows the differing aims of a hospital autopsy and a forensic autopsy by contrasting the matters of interest in an elderly woman with heart disease who died in a hospital a few days after fracturing her hip. Dr. Wagner next discusses the importance of medical history, which should come as no surprise to detectives and scene investigators. The bulk of the book, therefore, presents the external portion of an autopsy followed by the internal portion of an autopsy. Separate chapters show external findings that might be encountered in any case (such as livor mortis) and those findings specific to a given injury mechanism (such as lacerations and abrasions). External findings caused by natural disease are also shown, such as splinter hemorrhages under the nails caused by embolization of cardiac vegetations. The internal examination chapters begin with opening the body and proceed to show evaluation of the organs in situ and separately at the cutting station. The book then shows examples of a variety of disorders, such as an evolving myocardial infarction, pulmonary thromboembolus, cirrhosis, and a subdural hematoma. The depiction of the examination of the body ends with an image of the scalp being sewn back together and mention of the consideration of leaving the body as neat as possible out of respect for the decedent and consideration for the kin and funeral home.

¹ Associate Professor of Pathology, University of Alabama at Birmingham, and Associate Coroner/Medical Examiner, Jefferson County, AL.

The book concludes with chapters discussing the portions of an autopsy not completed in the morgue—the microscopic and toxicologic examinations, each with examples of common or important findings.

Dr. Wagner's care in thinking of his intended audience is obvious, for he neglects nothing of the process he is depicting. The internal examination chapters begin by showing placement of the body on a body block, the Y-shaped incision, and the opening of the rib cage. All these procedures and autopsy findings are nicely explained in a clipped, concise style that will be familiar to any forensic pathologist who has answered an investigator's questions about pulmonary anthracosis while trying to sort out a few bullet tracks. In addition to this thoroughness, Dr. Wagner's teaching is notable for his correlation of findings. For example, he refers the reader back to the image of the splinter hemorrhages of the nails when showing a valvular vegetation to reinforce the mechanism of formation of the findings in the nail beds, thereby reinforcing the process of correlation that makes for sound medical practice.

My only criticism of *Color Atlas of the Autopsy* is that many of the images in the book have been taken from digital stills obtained from a three charge-coupled device video camera used to record the performance of autopsies. The usefulness of a dynamic record available for leisurely review after the hurly burly of the autopsy is done is clear enough, but the photographs are blurry, a particular distraction in an atlas. The point of each photograph is plain, however, and this criticism may be less important for the intended audience, who will not be trying to evaluate independently the findings shown.

Students of forensic science, new homicide detectives and scene investigators, and attorneys who use autopsy findings in their work would all find *Color Atlas of the Autopsy* illuminating. Dr. Wagner has achieved his purpose in writing the book, and those non-medical professionals who work with him are especially fortunate.