

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Spitz and Fisher's Medicolegal Investigation of Death: Guidelines for the Application of Pathology to Crime Investigation, 4th Edition*

REFERENCE: Spitz WU, Spitz DJ. Spitz and Fisher's medicolegal investigation of death: guidelines for the application of pathology to crime investigation. 4th ed. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 2006.

The first known text to focus on medicolegal death investigation was the practical Chinese manual, the *His Yuan Lu* (or *Hsi Duan Yu*, "The washing away of wrongs") by Sung Tzhu, that dates back to c. 1250 AD. Much early literature involved toxicology and victim poisonings. The first substantive general texts were published during the Renaissance. The Sicilian physician Fortunato Fidelis (1551–1630) wrote the *De Relationibus Medicorum* in 1602 and the Papal physician Paulo Zacchias (1584–1659) wrote *Questiones Medico-Legales* in 1621. In America, in 1811, the American physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Rush, wrote *On the Study of Medical Jurisprudence*.

Although Massachusetts developed a medical examiner system in 1877, the first modern medical examiner office was established in New York City in 1918 under Dr. Charles Norris, who subsequently developed the first department of forensic medicine at NYU in 1932. His protégés, Thomas Arthur Gonzalez, Morgan Vance, and Milton Helpern, wrote the first modern comprehensive textbook on forensic pathology in 1937, *Legal Medicine and Toxicology*. A second edition, entitled *Legal Medicine, Pathology and Toxicology* (adding C. J. Umberger as author), with nearly double the pages was published in 1954. Of course, Milton Helpern helped to found the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (1948) and the National Association of Medical Examiners (1966).

After the first Gonzalez book, others on forensic medicine began to appear with increasing frequency. Keith Simpson published his first edition (of 12) of *Forensic Medicine* in 1947. Rutherford B. H. Gradwohl, another founder of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, wrote *Legal Medicine* in 1954, which was rewritten in 1968 by Francis Camps. In 1972, Russell Fisher and Werner Spitz published the classic textbook in the field, *Medicolegal Investigation of Death: Guidelines for the Application of Pathology to Crime Investigation*. Lester Adelson published *The Pathology of Homicide: a Vade Mecum for Pathologist, Prosecutor, and Defense Counsel* in 1974. In 1977, *Forensic Medicine: a Study in Trauma*

and *Environmental Hazards* was edited by Luke G. Tedeschi, William G. Eckert, and C. G. Tedeschi. In 1980, William J. Curran, A. Louis McGarry, and Charles S. Petty wrote (edited) *Modern Legal Medicine, Psychiatry, and Forensic Science*.

Meanwhile, forensic pathology was becoming recognized as a discipline. The first forensic pathology boards were held in 1959 and the National Association of Medical Examiners was established in 1966.

Of course, there is now a new crop of texts on forensic pathology.

When I took my forensic pathology board examination in the late 1980s, the *must-read* text was the Spitz and Fisher text. Despite other excellent books, it was the classic text that stood out from the pack.

The preface to the first (1972) edition of the Spitz and Fisher text states that: "No new textbook oriented to the homicide investigator or the novice forensic pathologist has appeared in the last two and one-half decades." The book was based upon a lecture series by Harvard professor Edward McGrath. "In the last thirty years there has been increasing sophistication in the training of police officers assigned to homicide investigation. To a significant degree this has been due to the philosophy developed at the Harvard Medical School in the late 1940's of teaching homicide investigators the nature of the medical aspects of injuries." Frances G. Lee became the patron of these lectures and they were formalized as the *Frances G. Lee Seminars on Legal Medicine*, beginning in 1945 at Boston and continued in Baltimore after 1968.

Dr. Werner U. Spitz and Dr. Russell S. Fisher of the Maryland Medical Examiner's Office wrote the first edition of the book in 1972. The book was rewritten and expanded in each of the subsequent three decades by Dr. Spitz, who had moved to the Wayne County (Detroit) Medical Examiner's Office; Dr. Fisher passed in 1987. Now, Dr. Spitz is joined by his son, Dr. Daniel J. Spitz, also now in Detroit, as coeditor of this fourth edition.

The various prefaces indicate a pride in simple style and avoidance of technical jargon, to facilitate a wider audience. The preface to the first edition emphasized the need to educate police homicide investigators, but the preface to the current edition states that "The book was meant for pathology residents, coroners, and

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all those who have an interest in the recognition and interpretation of wound patterns, and mechanisms of injury including criminal defense attorneys, attorneys engaged in civil litigation, detectives, investigators, forensic nurses, and others.”

The fourth edition has enlarged to almost 1300 pages of text, with 35 contributors, 11 new chapters and sections, and hundreds of new illustrations. This current version includes much more forensic science and forensic dentistry.

Although the authors have obviously taken care to be complete, objective, and authoritative, nonetheless, the text reflects the

views of its authors. Some sections of the text are better referenced than other sections. There are sections, sentences, and clauses that would not garner full agreement. Of course, there are highly controversial areas, such as in the “shaken baby syndrome,” in which the community has diverse and polarized views. The text does not always reflect all sides of issues, but rather dogmatically states a given opinion.

Every forensic pathologist should have a copy of Spitz and Fisher on their shelves, but gone are the days that it should be found alone.