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Creation and benefits of the “COVID Autopsy Listserve”

Alex K Williamson, MD

Department of Pathology & Laboratory Medicine,

Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra / Northwell, Hempstead, NY

Department of Pathology, LIJ Medical Center / Northwell

270-05 76th Ave #B68

New Hyde Park, NY 11040

awilliamson@northwell.edu

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To the Editor:

I'm writing to commend many members of the autopsy pathology community (including hospital and forensic practitioners) who have come together to help shape and deliver quality postmortem care during the initial wave of the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. In March 2020 as new cases were rapidly escalating in New York City and around the world, most autopsy pathologists likely appreciated that decedent management and autopsy practice would have to quickly and adeptly evolve in response to the pandemic. Staff questioned where to put increasing numbers of decedents that were incessantly arriving in morgue spaces. Attending and resident pathologists were concerned about the potential infectivity of COVID-19 at autopsy. I realized I didn't have sufficient information with which to effectively navigate the unfamiliar territory into which postmortem care was rapidly transitioning amid the evolving pandemic.

So, on 20 March 2020 I drafted an e-mail to a group of colleagues around the country asking their opinions on managing COVID-19 at autopsy and in the morgue. I also encouraged them to spread the word about this fledgling "COVID Autopsy Listserve (the "listserv" - really just an email distribution list) to anyone involved with postmortem care. That day ended with 55 inaugural participants, and by the end of March well over 100 people from around the United States and some international locations were engaging on the listserv. Today there are nearly 200 members on the listserv, mostly autopsy pathologists but also some researchers and clinicians. All are welcome, and new people join each week. The goal of the listserv is to disseminate knowledge and experience so we can safely and effectively expand

medical knowledge through autopsy while compassionately caring for decedents and their families.

The listserv's members have addressed and continue to deal with myriad issues relating to COVID-19 in the postmortem realm. However, one of its most rewarding successes was its empowering pathologists who have appropriate facilities, supplies, and experience to autopsy COVID-19 decedents. I developed and disseminated through the listserv two surveys, one each at the end of March and April 2020. Around 50 pathologists responded to each survey (51 in March, 49 in April). Interesting perspectives and practice trends documented in these surveys over the initial weeks of the pandemic include:

1. Most respondents felt that existing guidelines¹ allow for the safe performance of COVID-19 autopsies (84% March and 92% April);
2. More institutions performed or were preparing to perform COVID-19 autopsies in April (63%) than in March (35%);
3. More respondents had autopsied a COVID-19 decedent in April (51%) than had in March (6%); and
4. Respondents' support for resident involvement in COVID-19 autopsies increased from March (55%) to April (82%).

Experientia docet (experience teaches), and through the COVID Autopsy Listserv we continue to educate and reassure each other, collaborate on research, and optimize our

aggregate response to the COVID-19 pandemic. If you are involved with or interested in autopsy and/or decedent management then please join us (email the author).

Stay safe, and keep fighting the good fight!

REFERENCE

1. Collection and Submission of Postmortem Specimens from Deceased Persons with Known or Suspected COVID-19. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-postmortem-specimens.html>. Accessed 1 May 2020.