The Future of Forensic Pathology at Health Network Laboratories

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The Future of Forensic Pathology at Health Network Laboratories
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OBJECTIVES
• Identify challenges to the forensic pathology profession as a whole and at FPA
• Propose solutions to improve recruitment and retention of forensic pathologists at Health Network Laboratories

BACKGROUND
• Role of Forensic Pathologists
  – To establish the cause of death of a decedent by means of an autopsy
  – Give a medical opinion as to the manner of death
    • Natural, Homicide, Accident, etc
• Forensic Pathology Associates
  – Established in 1993 as a private organization
  – Incorporated by Health Network Laboratories in 2010
  – Currently employs four forensic pathologists as well as four forensic pathology assistants
  – Services 30 counties and hospitals in eastern and central Pennsylvania and holds full NAME accreditation

METHODS
• Use of FPA annual reports to track case statistics
• Research of forensic pathology and opioid epidemic sources (see references)
• Subject matter experts

REFERENCES

CHALLENGES TO PROFESSION
• Increasing caseloads, lack of physicians entering profession
  – Only 30 to 40 physicians enter forensic pathology each year
  – One of the lowest paid physician specialties
  – A large proportion of working FPs are nearing retirement age with no replacements
  – Many FPs are overwhelmed with cases and are more likely to suffer from physician burnout
  – There were an estimated 500 FPs working in the United States in 2012, however it is projected that at least 1000 are needed to cover the country
• Opioid Epidemic
  – Some models predict the opioid epidemic will not stabilize until 2025
  – Some FP offices have resorted to only performing toxicology testing and/or external examinations on apparent drug deaths
• NAME Accreditation Standards
  – National Association of Medical Examiners accredits offices and systems for high standards of death investigation
  – Prohibits FPs of accredited offices from performing more than 325 autopsies

RECOMMENDATIONS
• Looking Ahead
  – HNL must be able to attract the few FPs available to continue FPA’s high standards of quality, maintain NAME accreditation, and avoid physician burnout
• Recruitment and Retention
  – Competitive salary and signing bonuses
  – Federal Student Loan Forgiveness
    • Currently unavailable for (for-profit) HNL FPs
    • Solution: allow FPs to be employees of (not-for-profit) Lehigh Valley Health Network and have them contracted to FPA
  – Short term sabbaticals

Figure 1: Breakdown of the caseload of Forensic Pathology Associates for the years 2014-2017

Figure 2: Most frequently detected drugs among all drug related deaths (FPA cases) for the years 2014-2017

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