

Training in Forensic Pathology

Why choose Forensic Pathology as a career?

Forensic Pathology is the branch of Medicine concerned primarily with the investigation of suspicious death by performing post-mortem examinations. It is not quite as glamorous or dangerous as depicted on the television! It involves attending scenes of suspicious deaths, working as a team with Crime Scene Investigators and the police, performing post mortem examinations and giving evidence at court. It is an exciting branch of Medicine which is endlessly variable and very rarely dull. It is a small specialty with only around 50 consultants within the UK.

Training in Forensic Pathology

In the UK doctors can only start training in Forensic Pathology after 2 years of foundation doctor training and 2 years of specialist histopathology training. So the first step after the foundation years is to get a place on a histopathology training scheme. If you want to be a forensic pathologist it is useful to choose a histopathology training centre with good access to autopsies and ideally with links to a forensic pathology training centre.

During the 2 years of histopathology training, usually, you will take (and pass!) part 1 of the FRCPath. Histopathology Examination. At this point you need to choose a Forensic Pathology training centre. There are training centres in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England. Newcastle is one of the 3 forensic pathology training centres in England. Newcastle became a forensic pathology training centre in August 2003 and has full Royal College of Pathologists and GMC approval. We have 2 training posts within the Forensic Medicine Unit (FMU) which is part of the Department of Cellular Pathology at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in the centre of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The posts are partly funded by the Home Office. The RVI is part of the Newcastle-upon-Tyne NHS Foundation Trust (NUTH).

Previous Forensic Pathology Trainees

Of the 4 trainees who have completed forensic pathology training in Newcastle 3 are now consultants in England and 1 in Scotland. 4 of the present 50 consultant forensic pathologists in the UK were undergraduates in Newcastle and completed student attachments at the FMU and 3 others were trainee histopathologists in Newcastle.

The Forensic Medicine Unit (FMU)

The FMU is staffed by 3 Home Office Pathologists supported by 4 clerical staff. The FMU provides an on call forensic pathology service to 4 police forces (Northumbria, Durham, Cleveland and North Yorkshire) who together cover a population of 3.1 million people. There are around 170 suspicious deaths a year. Forensic neuropathology and paediatric pathology training is provided to forensic pathology trainees by a combination of local training and attachments at specialist units in Manchester and Liverpool.

The forensic pathology team also perform clinical examinations on living patients with injuries and give opinions on photographs both for the police and for defence solicitors on around 100 cases each year and perform 60 autopsies for defence solicitors each year. Trainees accompany the Home Office Pathologists to Inquests and Crown Court in order to gain experience in giving evidence in Coroner's and Criminal Courts.

Trainees are each provided with a PC, a good quality microscope and clerical support.

Newcastle is an examining centre both for the Royal College of Pathologists and for the Society of Apothecaries which runs the Diploma of Medical Jurisprudence and the Diploma of Forensic Medical Sciences.

The FMU has weekly meetings at which forensic pathology cases are discussed.

Trainees are encouraged to join the British Association in Forensic Medicine and to attend association and other relevant educational meetings including the Northern Forensic Pathology Group which is based in Cumbria.

Trainees are exposed to the full range of forensic pathology. Additional exposure to cases such as shootings and explosions is provided by established links with our colleagues in Yorkshire, Manchester, Glasgow and London. Attachments abroad (USA) are encouraged.

The training programme benefits enormously from being part of the Cellular Pathology Department by having ready access to histopathology experts, in particular, to heart, lung, liver, kidney, neuro and paediatric pathologists. The Cellular Pathology Department has 36 consultants including 3 neuropathologists and 3 paediatric pathologists and provides expertise in every area of diagnostic histopathology except eye pathology. The department provides the hub for the Northern Region histopathology training rotation (30 trainees) and also is a training centre for neuropathology, oral and paediatric pathology.

The Newcastle-upon-Tyne NHS Foundation Trust (NUTH)

NUTH has 2 modern mortuaries staffed by a highly professional team of anatomical pathology technicians. Between them the mortuaries have 10 autopsy tables including a dedicated forensic/high risk/perinatal theatre. The Cellular Pathology Department provides a "routine" autopsy service to H M Coroners for Newcastle and South Tyneside (1150 autopsies a year) and Coroners throughout the North-east and Cumbria refer their more difficult cases to us.

Forensic Trainees, appropriately supervised, assist with the routine autopsy service in Newcastle and South Tyneside and gain valuable experience giving evidence at Inquests. The Newcastle service in particular has a large proportion of post-operative and other complex cases.

Teaching and Research

Trainees are required and encouraged to take part in teaching and training. FMU staff provide undergraduate teaching to medical and law students at Newcastle University and to Forensic Science students at Northumbria and Teesside Universities. The former includes provision of a student selected component to 8 medical undergraduates each year. Forensic Trainees assist in the training of histopathology trainees in autopsy technique.

Trainees accompany the Home Office Pathologists to Crown Court in order to gain experience in giving evidence in Criminal Courts.

Opportunities are available to perform original research. The Unit has close links with Newcastle University which has a large medical school and is part of the Russell group.

Contact Us

If you are a medical student or doctor interested in a career in Forensic Pathology please contact us on Margaret.brown@nuth.nhs.uk.

It is often possible to arrange short attachments to the FMU for medical students or short placements for Foundation doctors.