

Health is not a condition of matter, but of mind

Written by Justin Newman, medical student

All roads lead to the same place. Thoughts on the autopsy service.

This month I am involved with the end of many different people's lives as I work on the autopsy service. Though different problems occurred, different parts of different bodies have worn out at different times, and many diseases plagued many patients in many ways, the medical endpoint is always the same.

No matter what a doctor may do, this month has been a realization for me that medical professionals are really not changing the way things end up, they are only making the trail a bit more pleasurable to travel, and allowing patients to travel a little bit further down that road.

Doing an autopsy is an incredible experience. Without knowing exactly why a person died, it is impossible to know what it was that went wrong. Without the knowledge of what went wrong, we cannot learn from the mistakes that were made. There is only one way to make things better in the future, by learning from the past.

An autopsy is an interesting process. It is something I would have had a difficult time being around five years ago when I started this medical school process. The people who work in the morgue have the utmost respect for the person and their body, and though the room is not somber, it is still a process that gets repeated several times each day.

Because of this, it is medical, business-like and somewhat disconnected from what the outside world would think about the process. It is fascinating from a student's perspective—all the rules of normal medical care are changed. The precious organs that are normally kept in their pristine and functioning status must be examined and looked at in a way that is not possible in a living person.

The act of an autopsy is a great way to see and re-learn the anatomy of the body and an insight to the medical advice doctors give to patients every day. The bodies tell the story. The lungs of a smoker are horrible. They are black, they have holes where the smoke and the body's response to this smoke have eaten away at the tissue and there is something strange about the way that they feel.

The liver of a person who drank too much is small, hard and just looks like it has taken a beating. The heart of a person who ate too much is covered in a layer of fat that makes you wonder how it was able to keep beating at all. And the heart of the patient who had high blood pressure is thick and hard from having to pump at high pressures for so long. The kidneys from a person with uncontrolled diabetes can be shriveled and scarred, the color is just not right—they look as if they had been about to just give up. The body doesn't lie.

An autopsy is a bit morbid and it takes a few calluses to be able to look beyond the obvious facts about what you are doing. To see how a person's body was in the last moments of their life is educational. However, the ability to learn from what that body can tell us makes patient care for everyone else better.

Justin Newman is originally from Holyoke and is attending medical school at the University Of Chicago Pritzker School Of Medicine.

This column is about health related issues with a focus on a rural community. The purpose of this column is to be informative and to comment on interesting medical and health related topics. Any questions or concerns that may arise regarding topics covered by this article should be addressed to your primary care doctor.

Justin can be reached by email at Justin.Tyler.Newman@gmail.com with comments or ideas for topics that you may desire to be addressed in this column. The goal of this column is that you find it not only entertaining and informative but also that it creates a desire to take a life-long

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interest your health and body.