

BOOK REVIEW

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A Review of "The Medical Detectives"

REFERENCE: Cooper, Paulette, *The Medical Detectives*, David McKay Co., New York, 1973, 238 pages, \$6.95.

The investigation of death is a science, but it is practiced properly by only a small number of trained and experienced people. That this science still has grave limitations is freely admitted by those knowledgeable in the field; nevertheless, the diligent and dedicated efforts of those individuals have already benefited society greatly. Hopefully, we will be able to keep pace with increasing demands, but to do so requires recognition and incentive.

This science must be expanded and its experts multiplied, for which public awareness is the sine qua non, particularly since much of it takes place in governmental circles where tax money constitutes the major, if not sole, source of financing. Yet relatively little information has been channeled for public consumption and education.

Ms. Cooper's book has been added to the small but growing effort to inform society. She has created a mini-lesson in forensic medicine for the layman. To attract attention and interest she has resorted to the sensational cases, but in a way which does not violate the scientific approach. Actually, she does it quite well. After a general background chapter, she organizes her material into the various types of deaths and investigative techniques: drowning, bloodstains (serology), time of death, criminalistics, toxicology, etc. She devotes considerable space to the problems of deciding suicide versus homicide versus accident and some of her comments are not very complimentary. If it is true, as she says, that the certification of suicide as a mode of death rests often on the bias of the certifier, we must do something about this problem. Such observations affect our credibility and our goals.

The author discusses, in separate chapters, such topics as paternity (primarily serology), rape, drugs, autoerotic asphyxiation, and battered children. She then devotes the final four chapters to nationally known personalities (Helpern, Noguchi, Wecht, and Edland), though numerous others in the American Academy of Forensic Sciences are mentioned throughout the book (Frank Cleveland received excellent comments on his handling of the Cincinnati Strangler).

It concerned me that though the scientific techniques of criminalistics were noted frequently, the author created the impression these were part of the forensic pathologist's

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armamentarium. What she did, intentionally or not, was to paint a picture of a unified scientific investigative approach—which is the way it should be done—but there may be some who will feel that the M.D. has received too much prominence. However, as one of the few attempts to extol the virtues of forensic sciences to the public, we should not condemn it for this reason.

Perhaps the best description in this book is found in the final paragraph of the last chapter—a quote by John Edland:

I am my own man. I call the shots as I see them and I'm used to not finding what people tell me I will find. In releasing the information [about his autopsy observations on victims of the Attica Prison riot], I felt that I might be saving lives. But there are many who feel that information damaging to the government should be kept secret. The medical examiner was traditionally on the side of the government and law enforcement. But it's just not true anymore. We are now an independent medicolegal organization. We're not interested in the prosecution or defense of any case. We just report what we find, and the only side we're on is the side of truth.

There is no way better than this to develop public confidence. Well said, John. Good job, Paulette.

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