

Local pathologist says he's not Quincy

# Humor makes job easier for doctor

By Carolyn Garcia  
Staff Writer

Dr. J.C. Lee readily admits he's not the kind of guy the average Joe would want to have lunch with. His off-beat sense of humor and quick smile serve him well in his profession.

Lee is a pathologist. Lee quickly dispels any ideas people may have that he is like the television character Quincy, although there is a sign on the morgue door that reads, "Quiet! Dr. Quincy Lee at work."

"I don't ride around in a big, black car and investigate all the crime scenes," Lee says. "I depend on the information police officers bring me."

After confessing he has never watched the TV program, Lee says he has used the character's notoriety to fend off persistent defense attorneys.

"One time this defense attorney kept badgering me because I told him I couldn't give him an exact answer to his question," Lee says. "I finally told him he should go ask Quincy."

Almost everyone in the courtroom laughed, including the judge, Lee says, and the only one who failed to see the humor was the defense attorney.

Neither does Lee share the fictitious character's fetish for neatness, as evidenced by his office, which is piled high with medical journals, reports and research books collected over his 20 years as a pathologist.

"The last time I cleaned it up everyone came in here and clapped," he says, "so I guess I won't do it again for awhile."

"This job is so serious, I try to make the atmosphere lighter for the people who have to attend the autopsy but aren't used to it. I try to tell a few inside jokes. Many officers have never seen an autopsy and they're kind of afraid. It makes things a lot easier."

Police have to attend all judge-ordered autopsies in order to receive evidence such as tissue samples or bullets. After recording the transaction in a book kept with the evidence, Lee says, the police must place the samples in the multi-locked refrigerator in the morgue.

The refrigerator bears the sign, "Anyone who touches this will have to testify in court."

This tends to deter any potential problems, Lee says.

Lee pointed out the fact that he is not the county medical examiner, but was asked by the county to serve as a pathologist. A Texas county must have a population of 200,000 before it can have a medical examiner.

Lee says performing a judge-ordered autopsy is a big responsibility.

Every time I do a medical-legal autopsy I can be called to testify," Lee says, "and I have been many times."

"I had some doubt about being called to court, but I began to see that they needed someone. I'm providing part of the evidence."

"You have to go through direct cross-examination by the defense attorney. It is really wild because you don't know what questions are coming next. You really have to stay calm and think through your answers."

"Each time I go to court I'm nervous because I can't afford to goof. I never underestimate the defense attorney's medical knowledge. I just try to address the jury as clearly as possible."

Lee got involved in pathology because he thought he was taking the easy way out. While attending medical school at Taiwan University he reached a point in his education where he had to make a choice between pathology or internal medicine. He says he chose pathology because he thought he would have less patient contact, and therefore would have to speak less English.

"My patients don't talk to me — or at least I hope they don't," Lee says.

Lee says he didn't think about the doctors he would have to talk to, families he would have to explain things to, lab technicians he would have to instruct, reports he would have to write and court appearances he would have to make.

But every case is a challenge because each one is different, he says.

Before St. Joseph Hospital had a morgue, Lee says, he performed his autopsies in funeral



Dr. J.C. Lee, a Bryan pathologist, examines an office aid.

Photo by Marie McLeod

homes, which proved to be very inconvenient, as he had to cart his tools around.

"When you have a morgue in a hospital with X-ray access it really simplifies things," Lee says. "I have to have some information on where to start. You can't just cut open and find what you're looking for."

"My first autopsy was a gunshot victim," he says. "I was doing it in a funeral home. I spent nearly two hours looking for the bullet and just

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— Dr. J.C. Lee, Bryan pathologist

when I had given up and was getting ready to take the body to the hospital to be X-rayed, the bullet fell out on the floor."

Lee, who uses his Ph.D in genetics to teach second-year medical students, says Texas A&M University donated the furnishings for his morgue and St. Joseph Hospital donated the room.

On weekends, except for judge-ordered autopsies, an A&M pathologist brings medical students to watch Lee perform autopsies.

"I hardly ever discuss work at home," he says. "When I finish an autopsy and have completed the report I usually call a reporter and give them my opinion — and that's it."

"A person was killed and that's bad enough. I feel there is no need to advertise it by talking about it."

Lee's most unusual case involved the death of A&M Corps of Cadets member Bruce Goodrich.

"To me it was a clear-cut case of heatstroke," Lee says.

"I had another case where an attorney kept calling me trying to convince me I should change my opinion from homicide to suicide," Lee says. "No one could buy me to say what was wrong."

Lee says there have been only a few cases here where murders have been disguised as suicide.

He says it is up to the justice of the peace to pronounce death and order an autopsy when he feels it's necessary, but the problem with this is that most justices of the peace have little or no medical background.

Two cases that really stick in his mind involved people being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Some boys had skipped Sunday school to go explore an old, abandoned house only to discover a body, Lee says.

"There was this guy who broke into this house to rob it and found a body decomposing in a bathtub," he says. "The guy had no choice but to call the police."

Lee says most people think of pathologists basically as lab technicians who are always looking at slides.

"Pathology involves a wide field and you have to have a broad base of knowledge," he says. "You have to know a lot about medicine because pathology is a medical practice."

Lee says aside from the obvious unpleasant things about his profession, one particular thing that bothers him is that many of his recent autopsies have been chemical-related deaths.

"It's pretty bad when we have to have people patrolling the hallways in our schools," Lee says. "What they should do is bring them in here and make them watch me. That way I can ask them if they want me to cut them like that. If so, then they can keep on doing what they are doing."

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