

What is a Pathologist?

Pathology means “the study of disease”. As a medical specialty it requires a combination of careful observational and investigative skills, an understanding of disease processes and of tissue injury and repair, knowledge of cell structure and function, and the application of genetic and molecular studies to the diagnosis of illness.

Pathologists typically spend a large amount of their time in the area of “surgical pathology”. When a tissue biopsy is performed, it is the pathologist who is responsible for performing studies on that biopsy and arriving at a diagnosis. He or she determines, by evaluation of the tissue grossly and microscopically, whether that tissue is normal, shows an infection, is a cancer and, if so, what kind, and determines whether further surgical excision is needed. Information provided in the pathologist’s report often helps determine what the direction of treatment and prognosis of a patient with cancer will be.

Pathologists also perform fine needle aspiration biopsies of lumps that can be felt (thyroid, lymph node, and breast). This involves speaking to and examining the patient, performing the biopsy and subsequently looking under a microscope at the material obtained from the biopsy in order to arrive at a diagnosis. Fluids such as pleural fluid and pap smears are also examined by pathologists.

Autopsies are performed by pathologists. It is a common misconception that autopsies make up the bulk of a pathologist’s job. In fact, little time is spent performing autopsies as compared to the tasks described above. Pathologists combine their knowledge of anatomy and the mechanisms and patterns of disease with observations made during the autopsy, and analysis of the clinical records as well as their microscopic evaluation in answering questions surrounding a patient’s death. Not all, but many, questions can be answered.

“Clinical pathology” is that area of pathology which involves the development and oversight of lab tests and the safe administration of blood and blood products. Pathologists work with clinicians and laboratory personnel to determine which lab tests are offered, which tests should be ordered and how to interpret test results.

As you can see, we pathologists do not spend our days closeted in the laboratory. We are in constant communication with one another, clinicians and other health providers, working with them to arrive at diagnoses. In our role in investigating and solving diagnostic problems we are considered to be “the doctor’s doctor”. Most of us see patients in the clinics. In addition, many of us are involved in resident teaching and serve on Hospital Committees such as the Blood Utilization Committee and the Infection Control Committee. It is our great pleasure and responsibility to apply our knowledge and training to assist in the diagnosis and treatment of our patients.