

Beyond the Test Connecting Communities Through Pathology
2:5 Start Before You're Ready: Sparking an Interest in Forensic Pathology

Joanna (00:15)

Hey guys, it's Joanna, and welcome back to Beyond the Test: Connecting Communities Through Pathology, a podcast from the CAP Foundation. Before we start, I want to be honest with you for a minute. When we first launched this podcast, we didn't really have a clear direction. That's not to say the guests' stories and topics we've covered weren't important. They absolutely were. We've had some incredible conversations and shared stories that highlight the impact pathology has on patients and communities around the world. But over the past year, we've been thinking a lot about who this podcast can help the most. And let's be real, there's a pathology workforce shortage. We need more people entering the field, staying in the field, and helping shape what comes next.

So moving forward, we're focusing on the people who are going to carry pathology into the future: medical students, residents, fellows, and early career pathologists. This podcast is for you.

Every episode will feature someone who's maybe one or two steps ahead of where you are right now. People who remember what it was like to choose pathology, survive residency, apply for fellowships, land that first job, find mentors, deal with imposter syndrome, and figure out what kind of pathologist they wanted to become. Have real conversations about the things people don't always talk about. The wins, the challenges, the lessons learned.

And the advice they wish someone had given them earlier. My hope is that you'll walk away from each episode feeling a little more connected, a little more confident, and maybe even a little more excited about where your own journey in pathology could take you. So with that, let's get started.

If you've ever found yourself Googling forensic pathology at midnight, maybe after watching a true crime documentary, maybe after a rotation that completely surprised you, or maybe because you just had a feeling there was something there, then this episode's for you. Today's guest is Dr. Jenna Aungst, a 2025 recipient of the CAP Foundation Sparking Interest in Pathology Award. This award recognizes individuals who are doing something incredibly important, helping more people discover pathology and showing learners why this specialty is worth exploring.

In our conversation, we talk about what drew her to forensic pathology, her project, and what it's like navigating the early stages of a pathology career. Whether you're still figuring out what specialty fits, already on the pathology path, or just curious about where this field can take you, I think you're going to get a lot out of this conversation.

Joanna (03:04)

Hi Dr. Aungst, thank you for joining us today. Before we dive into your project, can you introduce yourself to our listeners and share a little bit about your path and pathology?

Dr. Jenna Aungst (03:14)

Yeah, absolutely. So my name is Jenna Aungst. I am an incoming PGY one at University of Texas Medical Branch, which is down in Galveston, Texas, just outside of Houston. Going into AP and CP Anatomic and Clinical Pathology. I'm also a Masters of Public Health candidate at Georgia State University, concentrating in epidemiology. Pretty excited to be finishing that this semester. It's been a long road.

And then just generally overall my path into pathology, I was very lucky in that I had the opportunity to work in a medical examiner's office prior to pursuing medical school. And I walked in my first day and met the people and just the rest is history. Everything just kind of clicked for me. And so I did a lot of administrative and medical education there at the medical examiner's office, which is down in Atlanta, DeKalb County. And they were very kind and let me participate in autopsies and sit along and, you know, learn the histology and go over microscopics with them and the rest is history from there.

Joanna (04:33)

So why forensic pathology? Did it just kind of fall into it or do you always have an interest in that?

Dr. Jenna Aungst (04:41)

Yeah, so that's a fair question.

Forensic pathology is something I think a lot of people don't really realize is is an option and it certainly wasn't for me getting started. you know, a long time ago I had a these kind of disparate interests, which I think a lot of us do, we don't really know pathology even is an option going in. And so I had interest in infectious disease.

And I always liked, you know, detective shows and investigations. And, I always thought the idea of forensics was very interesting. But I was more so going down the infectious disease route. And my brother actually, I have a twin brother. His name's Kyle. He is a gem. He's actually going to pathologist or applying to pathologist assistance pool right now. So maybe we can start practice or something. He was originally interested in becoming an autopsy technician and I remember thinking you know I what we want to do what you know and so I had that really kind of sparked my interest and so I pursued some workshops up at the forensic anthropology center in Knoxville Tennessee lovingly the body farm. They do quite a bit of research there and I took a skeletal pathology course and a remains recovery course and you know obviously kind of digging around online as well and I met the most inspiring forensic pathologist there. Her name is Rachel Geller. She's now the the fellowship program director down at the Georgia Bureau Investigation. But she was just a fellow at the time, and she it was so excitable, and her passion was like infectious. And she kind of helped me realize that forensic pathology is a great way to merge all of these disparate interests, right? And so I've always liked teaching as well. I've always loved outreach. I love data, you know, and so it as well as just the practice of pathology, kind of giving people these necessary answers.

She helped me realize that it was a viable career option and helped me kind of merge all these things together. So forensics kind of just, you know, got me early and I I've I have interest in other

types of pathology as well. I think during my rotations, the path was really interesting to me as well, surge path, but I think forensics has got me in a chokehold.

Joanna (07:17)

that's interesting because you're not the first person to mention Dr. Geller as kind of a mentor and a resource. So we're hoping to get her on a future episode. So fingers crossed, but yeah, that that's great to hear.

Dr. Jenna Aungst (07:29)

She's her energy is just insane and I don't know where she finds it all. But she she really does reach out and do a lot of work with all the students even applying to med school, she like read all of my personal statements, all of my secondaries. Like I credit her with, you know, the process of getting into med school and not losing my sanity. She was fantastic.

Joanna (07:52)

so how did you first learn about the CAP Foundation sparking interest in Pathology Award and what made you decide to apply for it?

Dr. Jenna Aungst (08:00)

So I learned about the award relatively early in medical school. I got pretty involved with pathology education outreach through Virtual PathSig and Match to Path.

And so we would do some work every year where we go we would go and compile all of the different awards and try to see you know what funding opportunities are out there to help support students and trainees that are interested in pathology. And I think CAP does a great job of making that information very accessible. It's one of the first things that pops up when you Google funding opportunities. And so that's how I stumbled upon it.

Joanna (08:40)

I love hearing that because that's honestly what we hope happens, and it's actually why these programs exist. Someone's searching for funding, looking for opportunities, maybe just clicking around online, and they discover an award that helps them take an idea from this would be cool someday to I'm actually doing this.

Joanna (08:58)

Awesome. so your project focuses on creating free open access forensic pathology education models for learners at different stages of training. Can you tell me just more about what your project is and kind of what inspired you to do it?

Dr. Jenna Aungst (09:14)

Yeah, absolutely. So in my experience getting involved in forensic path, traditionally it's kind of a very

it's kind of a closed-off field, right? Like safety concerns, privacy concerns, especially for students kind of earlier on in their career trajectory, high school, undergrad, where we are starting to see

more interest in forensic pathology emerge very early. those opportunities aren't necessarily available to those students just because where they're at in the educational timeline.

Depending on where the offices are. And, you know, but given this massive workforce shortage in forensic pathology, a lot of the pathologists just simply don't have the time to facilitate, you know, full rotations or shadowing. And I think that's something that we don't always realize as students when we're reaching out and trying to engage with the prospective specialty, just how time-consuming that is for the other side of the education spectrum.

and so, you know, trying to like kind of fill this resource gap for these students and kind of create more opportunities for them to get exposed. we had done a survey through the National Association of Medical Examiners Workforce Development Committee back in 2023, which was recently published just a couple weeks ago through BMC Medical Education Open Access. So if anybody wants to read it, shout out to that. and we identified some.

These gaps, and we saw multiple qualitative themes from our respondents who were both educators. We we did like a dual survey population. we did educators that were facilitating medical examiner and coordinator education programs, and the people that are interested in forensics, and then overlap that to try to see where the gaps were, and getting access to high-quality educational modules was something where.

There was unfortunately a deficit, you know, especially things that are open access. and so we were hoping to kind of fill that gap by generating this free open access learning platform that had like multiple functionalities and kind of helped fill those gaps in conjunction with some of the existing resources, like Path Elective. They have a fantastic library of

educational resources for all different types of pathology. And so we kind of I guess built off of that model and created something in conjunction with the learning platform called the Pathology Scholar Certificate Program, which was piloted at Wake Forest School of Medicine through their pathology department. And so that program is now hosted on our learning

platform as well. So we've got a couple different things here going on. We've got the modules where anybody can go in and they can learn about the basics of medical legal death investigation or I think a couple of our other ones. We have forensic pathology and public health under understanding how it interfaces with data, mass fatality and

incidents, death certification, some of these kind of core foundational concepts where anybody can log in. And when you complete that module, it generates a certificate. And then on the other end we have the certificate program where you can upload those certificates that you complete both on our learning platform or through a website like Path Elective or AB Paths Path Primer.

any different resource and once they complete like a certain number of certificates or upload a certain number of certificates and do a few shadowing experiences, they get this final like I'm a pathology scholar and they can add that to their residency application or you know their medical school application, which I think is really helpful for some of these students that are kind of in

more rural underserved areas and might not be able to drive 20 minutes like I did living in Atlanta to go to an ME office.

To get this exposure, right? So the big idea was just trying to make pathology education more accessible. And then also taking this like super passionate group of students that have like stumbled upon pathology and making them so that when they do go to their in-person educational rotations or you know, they're interfacing with these pathologists, they're impressing them with all of their knowledge, and they're like, that's a macrophage, that's a neutrophilage.

fill right like we want our scholars to come out with a good foundational knowledge set

Joanna (13:50)

Yeah, and that's great,

especially for those that might not really understand the different gaps there might be for those that are in rural and underserved areas. I mean, I grew up in Chicago, so it that stuff like that never truly crosses your mind that like for some transportation might be an issue or just

Getting access to the resources is just already putting you behind somebody that is in a major city that might be able to access that more quickly. So it's really cool that you're helping to close that gap. were there any surprises or challenges you encountered while developing your project?

Dr. Jenna Aungst (14:23)

Please.

Right, yeah. So I

don't know about surprises per se. Thankfully it was something I kind of foresaw up front, but once you build a project like this, it doesn't stop, right? Like there is sustainability funding was a major thing that I had to kind of plan for early on, we established the the learning platform with the CAP award.

And then the National Association of Medical Examiners provided us sustainability funding for the foreseeable future so that we were able to do the startup and now we can grow and expand. And then, you know, aside from funding, obviously it's a whole learning platform, and I

I'm an incoming resident. I don't know all things about pathology yet, nor will I probably ever, right? And so building a really nice, comprehensive team of passionate people like myself was really important. And so NAME supported us also in starting a whole committee this learning platform was the precipice for this, right? And so we started the Future Forensic Pathologist Committee, which has

I think like it's like 30 to 40 people in it right now from all different stages of their education. We have you know medical students, residents, fellows. we're trying to recruit some people that are from you know ancillary other like education programs like PhD candidates, just so that we're

getting like a full spectrum of expertise so that you know we're tapping into this group consistently to understand what their needs are, right?

As a med student, you know, it's easy to like be able to articulate what your needs are at that given time. But a lot of times when we're working on these medical education projects, it's hard to understand because even like two years out, like things change in medical education so rapidly that it's important to engage people at these different levels. So I think funding being the most important thing, and then obviously having this like group of people that I can count on and communicate.

with and help build this resource with together

Joanna (16:39)

did you have a particular module that was kind of your favorite or is there one that you were especially excited for people to explore?

Dr. Jenna Aungst (16:48)

Yeah,

so I really like Dr. James Gill. he did a death certification webinar that I was really excited to integrate. Dr. Gill has been a mentor of mine as well for several years. and he's also very involved in CAP and ASCP. and he is just for as accomplished as he is, he is the most laid back, like kind, supportive person, like very

He's very modest for his achievements. And so I was really excited to be able to take some of the the work that he's done and put that kind of on our learning platform. I think he does a great job introducing the concepts, basic concepts, the forensic pathology, and he does a lot of case-based learning as well, which I think makes things a lot more interesting. So that was probably one of my favorites, and it's also one of our most popular modules to date.

the mass fatality incidents with Joyce DeYoung, who's now one of the deans up in Michigan, she's also doing incredible things in medical education and pathology. I think that one was really fascinating. and then the public.

Health one as well, just because public health has you know a special place in my heart. going forward, we're looking at doing a bunch of different exciting topics, some more like specialized and for different stages of learning. especially we're focusing on more so on resident and fellow support because it seems like a lot of our current topics are more basic, foundational. and so we are trying to match those with.

the forensic pathology in service exam data, which is an exam that the forensic pathology fellows take about midway through their program to try to see you know where they're at and where what they need to focus on for the remainder of the year. So we're taking some of those areas where it seems like people are kind of struggling with, a lot of them kind of like administration and quality assurance or court testimony, and so

So we're trying to address some of those in our upcoming modules.

Joanna (18:59)

That's great. so many people have these different innovative ideas, but they never take the next steps to do that. what would you say to someone that kinda has an idea but is maybe afraid to move forward with it? what would advice would you have for them?

Dr. Jenna Aungst (19:16)

I think the biggest advice that I could give anybody is to start before you're ready. it's good to have all of your ducks in the row the best that you can, try to foresee things that might come up and you know, do some contingency planning and some strategic planning. But at the end of the day, the most important step to getting any, you know, small or large project done is simply getting started. And I think that pathologists are generally a very

Supportive and excitable group of people. And so if you go to a trusted mentor or even a mentor you've never worked with before, and somebody you've seen online, and like you know, you really would love to collaborate with them, try reaching out, you know. And and sometimes you might not get a response, which is okay, you know. But for you know, 50 no's, you're gonna get one yes, and that one yes is gonna absolutely change your life.

I think there are a lot of people that love projects, medical education or otherwise, and so would be very supportive.

Joanna (20:17)

and I guess for listeners who maybe never considered forensic pathology or even just pathology in general as a career path, what do you want them to know about the field and the different opportunities it offers?

Dr. Jenna Aungst (20:31)

Yeah, absolutely. there is a workforce shortage, which it is difficult, but also a great opportunity for competitive salaries and negotiating a fantastic work-life balance. And so it's a field that's rapidly growing.

I think pathology is a really exciting and rewarding field. The salaries are on the rise. it's generally something that's not that most students or trainees at any level really think about. But once you find it and you start meeting the people, you're gonna find that it's a very rewarding and exciting field. So I would strongly encourage you to consider it. Or even if you're considering something that

A different field that maybe runs in parallel, right? Pathology in general works in collaboration with a lot of different specialties. We work with surgeons, we work with hospitalists, we provide the data that's very important to supporting the entire continuity of care for a patient. And so with forensic pathology specifically, I know one of the big concerns that might dissuade a lot of people is the opportunity.

for like patient interaction or even interaction with other medical providers that we might not necessarily see in a medical-legal setting. But I want to do like a a nice plug for forensics and say that, you know, the interactions that you have with family members, the interactions you have with juries, with attorneys, those may seem

overwhelming but they're actually very rewarding as well. I think that when I talk to some of my clinician colleagues, especially some that work in like the emergency room, their patients don't always come back and say thank you. But in the forensic setting, nine times out of ten, you are providing answers that those people cannot find anywhere else. And so family members are some of the most rewarding people that you can possibly work with.

And so I would strongly encourage people to explore not just forensics but all of pathology. I think the learning platform is a great resource. Path elective is a great resource. Your local pathologists, if you just co-call and reach out, those are great people. And even if you decide to ultimately not specialize in pathology, I think having a good understanding of where it fits and how to

How to interact with your pathologist is really nice. And so strongly encourage that for anybody that might be interested.

Joanna (22:59)

That's great. Thank you. yeah, I

I don't have a medical background, so I don't know much about pathology until I actually started working here. But I'd say like the only real experiences I ever heard was like forensics or forensic pathology and like true crime and stuff like that. So it's interesting to see like

how expansive pathology actually is. So it's it's good to hear and understand how everything just kind of like works together. That's just it's so interesting to me. But

Dr. Jenna Aungst (23:31)

to think of pathology

as the gateway drug. we have media working for us. Everybody likes CSI and so we're like, hey, come on. We promise we're it might not be as well lit, but I promise everything here is very interesting.

Joanna (23:46)

before we wrap up, do you have anything else that you'd like to add?

Dr. Jenna Aungst (23:51)

just in general, one last plug for forensic pathology. I feel like it's one of the specialties that really allows you to contribute kind of simultaneously. You're you're contributing to medicine, you're

contributing to research, to education, to public health, the justice system. it's very intellectually challenging, it's meaningful, really opportunities.

offers a lot of opportunities that many students don't realize exist until they're exposed. So again, one last shout out, reach out to your pathologist, take advantage of these resources that are online. And we're excited to have you here. So thank you for listening.

Joanna (24:25)

Thank you.

Joanna (24:27)

Start before you're ready. That's my favorite takeaway from today's conversation. whether that's applying for an opportunity, reaching out to a mentor, starting a project, or exploring a career path you're curious about, you don't have to have everything figured out before you take the first step.

Sometimes the best opportunities come from simply being willing to begin.

If you'd like to find any of the resources mentioned in today's episode, be sure to check out the show notes. And if you'd like to support programs like the Sparking Interest in Pathology Award and the many other grants, awards, and opportunities helping shape the future of pathology, visit foundation.cap.org.

Don't forget to follow us on social media and be sure to like, follow, and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts so you never miss an episode. Until next time, I'm Joanna. Thank you so much for listening. Keep making connections. Keep making an impact. And remember, don't wait until you're ready. Start now. We'll see you next time.