So you want to be a Histopathologist?


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So you want to be a Histopathologist?

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WHAT IS HISTOPATHOLOGY?
Histopathology is the pathological examination of tissues
removed from patients for diagnostic reasons, often to
confirm or exclude malignancy. It can include gross
(macroscopic) examination, microscopic examination,
immunohistochemistry and molecular testing.

DESCRIBE A TYPICAL WORKING WEEK FOR A CONSULTANT.
A substantial part of our time is spent at a microscope.
We would also typically prepare for and attend one
multidisciplinary cancer meeting per week. A small amount
of time would also be spent either performing or supervising
specimen dissection.

IS IT A LONELY EXISTENCE?
Compared to clinical work, microscopy is a solitary activity,
but pathologists do not often complain of feeling lonely.
Our microscopy sessions tend to be interrupted regularly by
friendly biomedical scientist colleagues bringing us glass
slides and if we work in large centres a substantial amount
of time is spent one-to-one with registrars who are heavily
supervised. We also tend to be in and out of each others
offices regularly showing each other interesting cases. Our
role has been enhanced in recent years by weekly attendance
at multidisciplinary cancer meetings where we play a pivotal
role and where we have a strong sense of team membership.

ARE PATHOLOGISTS GENERALLY A BIT ECCENTRIC?
Doctors with mild Asperger’s syndrome tend to make good
diagnostic pathologists but on the other hand are often not
great colleagues as their team working skills can be poor.

APART FROM THOSE WITH MILD ASPERGER’S SYNDROME, WHO TENDS TO BE ATTRACTIVE TO THIS AREA OF MEDICINE?
Pathologists often play a key role in undergraduate medical
education and some impressionable young medical students
are inspired to follow strong role models. Doctors who get
more satisfaction from the academic aspect of medicine rather
than patient contact also tend to be attracted to histopathology
and other laboratory specialties.

HOW MUCH CLINICAL CONTACT IS THERE IS HISTOPATHOLOGY?
Very little. Our colleagues in cytopathology do have more
clinical contact by meeting patients in one-stop head and
neck or breast clinics, but histopathologists generally have
very little patient contact.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD HISTOPATHOLOGIST?
The knowledge base required is quite heavy, so you need to
be prepared for this. The most important skill is having an
keen eye for pattern recognition as microscopy is a visual
discipline. Although this can be learnt, some pathologists
have a natural flair. Attention to detail is really important, both
carefully examining microscopic slides and carefully proof-
reading reports before they are issued. A good pathologist also
needs to be organised and good at time management.

HOW MANY AUTOPSIES DO YOU DO PER WEEK?
Personally I don’t do any. Many pathologists opt out of
post-mortem examinations, but if this is something you are
interested in, there are many job opportunities where this is
a key element.

WHAT IS A HISTOPATHOLOGIST’S WORST NIGHTMARE?
What histopathologists dread most is making a false positive
cancer diagnosis (which may result in overtreatment) or on
the other hand diagnosing a malignant case as benign (which
may result in a delay in cancer treatment). This unfortunately
does happen from time to time.

WHAT ROLE DO HISTOPATHOLOGISTS PLAY IN CANCER SCREENING PROGRAMS?
We play a pivotal role in cancer screening programs where
we attempt to carefully categorise pre-cancerous conditions.
We witness, first hand, both the positives and negatives of the
cancer screening programs – we see the success stories where
small invasive cancers are diagnosed early but we also see
the negative side with overtreatment of mild abnormalities
and occasional missed cancers (interval cancers). Working
within NHS screening programs can be quite stressful for
these reasons.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST BENEFIT OF THE JOB?
There is a lot of job satisfaction because most of our work
involves the diagnosis of important medical and surgical
conditions. In addition, our day to day work is ultraflexible as
microscopy sessions can be moved about to allow attendance
at various meetings.

WHERE CAN I FIND OUT MORE?
Visit the website of the Royal College of Pathologists
(www.rcpath.org) or make an appointment with your local
histopathologist.