

Sensing the corpse: A social anatomy of the hospital autopsy

Presented by

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Philomena Horsley is a medical anthropologist at The University of Melbourne. Over the past thirty years she has worked in the areas of sexuality, disability, women's health, patient advocacy and HIV/AIDS. These experiences stirred her current interest in hospital systems and the dilemmas of death which face us all. She has also enjoyed a longstanding fascination with crime fiction.

Dead bodies are in vogue. Dissected corpses litter our television screens and crime books. Yet in Western hospitals the autopsy is almost extinct, and opinions about the usefulness of the modern autopsy remain sharply divided. How can this be? Why has the autopsy become so unpopular in modern medicine? Does it still have a role to play in scrutinising death? And should the public be invited to join the debate about its future?

Questions such as these prompted this ethnographic study in which I spent more than a year behind the scenes of a large Australian hospital. I observed autopsies. I talked to the people whose job it was to cut up corpses, the hospital staff who cared for dying patients, the relatives who had faced the question of an autopsy. This journey introduced me to the methods, systems and rationale that underpin medical autopsies. Uncovered were the comforts and concerns that the autopsy provides for doctors and relatives alike, and the science and sentiment intrinsic to the procedure. This presentation offers some anthropological reflections on a project that engaged all the senses.

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4-5pm

Room 515, Level 5, 207 Bouverie Street, Carlton

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PhD Oration