

# Technology To Tell Tales Of The Dead

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New technology in the field of post-mortem examinations will revolutionise the ways autopsies are conducted within our own lifetimes, a top British scientist has predicted.

The impact on religious communities of the new technology - particularly for Jewish and Islamic communities across the world - would be massive claims Professor Guy Ruty, Professor of Forensic Pathology at the University of Leicester.

The Forensic Pathology Unit is pioneering within the UK in its use of new technologies to establish cause of death.

Now Professor Ruty presented his views at the Sixth International Symposium on Advances in Legal Medicine in Hamburg on September 19-24.

And in a paper in Forensic Science, Medicine, and Pathology published this month, Professor Ruty questions whether invasive autopsies are necessary.

He said: "I was one of four international speakers invited to this conference where the subject matter was very controversial: Do we need to do autopsies any more or can we use new technologies to carry them out instead?"

"Advances in diagnostic investigations like axial radiography (CT) and MRI mean that certain diagnosis can be done without the need for

invasive autopsies.

"This has enormous implications for many religious communities and states including Jewish and Muslim. They support alternatives to invasive autopsies for religious reasons and also because it speeds up the diagnostic process."

Professor Rutty said the key area of controversy was whether state-of-the-art technology should replace autopsies or complement them.

"Technology cannot be used in all cases- for example, it will not diagnose heart attacks which account for 80% of the cause of death. It will not diagnose natural diseases nor toxicology or overdoses - all of Shipman's victims, for example.

"However, if used appropriately, CT and MRI have a vital role to play as diagnostic tools and we must define the areas in which they can replace autopsies. We will be calling for all studies in the use of new technology in autopsies to be brought together in order to build up our evidence base in their use."

Professor Rutty said that, at Leicester, CT had been used for over 2 years in particular forensic pathology cases. This made Leicester a forerunner in its use within the UK. The technologies were also been used in Denmark, Switzerland and Australia.

Professor Rutty said: "We use CT as often as is possible before performing an invasive autopsy. We have embraced this new technology and use it as an important diagnostic tool in forensic practice."

This meant the technology had particular use in identifying cause of death in cases of trauma eg traffic accident victims, shooting/stabbing victims. Professor Rutty said in many such cases, technology provided a

better picture of cause of death and in better detail than traditional invasive autopsies.

He added: "The national use of technology in autopsies will be subject to protocols being in place -we need to define which areas it may be used in and in retraining radiologists and pathologists. There are also cost implications in purchasing the equipment .

"However, I believe the benefits outweigh the disadvantages and I predict the use of technologies like CT and MRI in autopsies will grow exponentially and become commonplace in Britain within five years."

Source: University of Leicester

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