EDITORIAL

From Gil Brogdon to modern post-mortem imaging

There are some unforgettable encounters in one’s professional life. Happily (or sadly), they are rather rare, but meeting Gil Brogdon was certainly one of these for many of us. Unfortunately, he died on the 28th of March 2014 in Minute, Alabama at the age of 85 years old, surrounded by with his beloved family.

We had the immense opportunity of welcoming him in Marseilles in October 2012 during the 2nd French-speaking course on virtual autopsy. What struck me most at the time was his attitude: gentle and sharp-witted, lively and attentive, looking at the same time back on the past (in which his role was capital) and forward, keeping a permanent vision towards the future.

Gil Brogdon was a pioneer in many areas in radiology and particularly in the use of post-mortem imaging techniques. He was born in 1929 and studied medicine at Little Rock, Arkansas and then at the Bowman-Gray school of Medicine, Winston-Salem. In his career, he was successively Head of the Department of radiology in the prestigious John Hopkins Hospital, at the University of New Mexico, before ending his career as Head of Department of Radiology and then emeritus Professor at the University of South Alabama.

He contributed to many publications, the first dating from 1953, at the age of 24 years old! Of course, he is the author of the reference book on the subject, “Brogdon’s Forensic Radiology”, our everyday “bible”. In 2012, he was invited first to Zurich and then to Marseilles to share his exceptional experience with an entertaining irreverence and looking towards the future by considering how our speciality will develop over the coming years and decades. He also reminded us that the first radiograph presented in a legal court was done so as early as 1898, almost at the same time as its invention by Roentgen. As early as 1998 in a meeting in Boca Raton in Florida, he declared that a century later we still did not know the true value of what imaging, in particular cross-sectional techniques could provide to the understanding of the causes of death.
And whilst forensic medicine almost immediately adopted the radiographic technique, the first use of X-rays in a shooting investigation took place in Canada in 1895 [1]. A year later in 1896, the first use of X-rays in a homicide was reported in England [2]. Subsequently, clinical and forensic radiology continued to play a major role in medical practice. The first description of the use of computed tomography in forensic medicine in living people dates back to 1977, when a CT was used to assess a head shot injury [3]. The first use of CT in post-mortem forensic medicine dates back to 1983 and involved investigation into a diving death [4]. The major turning point in its history was in 1994 in Israel where for the first time CT was used not only in addition to autopsy but also for its potential ability to replace it [5]. As early as 1996, a British group compared the alternative role of MRI in studying perinatal deaths [6]. At that time, the numbers of scientific publications on this subject continued for several years followed by an exponential increase due to the creation and work of the Virtopsy™ group from 2003, benefiting from both an enlightened vision and rapid technological improvements both in terms of acquisitions (increased number of detectors) and post-processing. Nowadays, post-mortem CT and MRI have become almost routine in many countries across the world, both in adult and paediatric practice, often with many CT and/or MRI machines within medico-legal facilities. The year 2012 saw the birth of a new society, the ISFRI (International Society of Forensic Radiology and Imaging) with a dedicated journal, JOFRI (Journal Of Forensic Radiology and Imaging), which are designed to harmonize the international protocols in this area, to establish a consensual international nomenclature [7], and develop good practices and both initial and continuing training in medico-legal imaging.

Gil Brogdon will forever remain one of the founding fathers of modern medico-legal imaging. He was due to attend the annual ISFRI meeting in Marseilles in 2014 and we all missed him.

Disclosure of interest

The authors have not supplied their declaration of conflict of interest.

References


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