

El Paso County Office of the Medical Examiner

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Letter to editor

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The El Paso County Office of the Medical Examiner (EPOME) is situated in Texas, the second largest state in the United States by both area and population. It is roughly eleven times the size of Sri Lanka. “Everything is bigger in Texas”, is a common phrase uttered by Americans which exemplifies the size of the state. El Paso is a nice city surrounded by a chain of mountains.

It has a diversity of ethnicity. The Mexican, Hispanic, American including Native American, Black and Asian people are very nice and always treat you with a smile and are helpful. The city became the safest city in four (04) consecutive years in the USA, though it is bordered by Mexico. The reason may be the vigilant law enforcement authority. Further, one of the USA’s biggest triformer camps is situated here.

As stated earlier, El Paso is a border city to Mexico, so that you can experience enough Mexican culture there. You don’t feel like you are isolated as the people are very good.

Cost of living is very reasonable here. The climate is very good except for a short period of high heat during the summer months. Traffic is not a problem here and you can reach any destination in reasonable time within the city, provided you have private transport facilities. Price of fuel is very low and it can be further reduced if you have the membership at Costco or Sam’s Club, which are large chain stores. It is very rare to see an accident, as road discipline and infrastructure facilities are great.

Education, as expected is of high standards in the United States. Schools have employed nurses and psychologists for the wellbeing of kids. Around 20 children are allocated to each classroom. When I submitted my scholarship grant letter to the school authorities, they provided free lunch for my two kids. Breakfast is free of charge for every student. Laptops are provided free of charge and are allowed to take home to do their homework. Even, during the summer vacation children can go to the summer school and have their meals.

My advice to future trainees who are looking forward to proceeding to the United States is to obtain membership at wholesale stores like Costco and Sam's Club. This will give you a big advantage if you are moving there with your family. Big shopping malls like JC Penny, Kohl's, Sears and Macy's are packed with eye-catching clothes and products at reasonable prices. Especially on deal days, they can drain your pocket if you go there with your family.

You can taste spicy Mexican and Tex-Mex food at restaurants for a reasonable price. Price of Pizza is very reasonable at Sam's Club and Costco and they are mouthwatering.

Buying a firearm is super easy in the United States and even easier in Texas. Anyone can buy a weapon for US\$ 100 from a pawn shop by the side of the road. However, it is surprising to see that the crime rate is low when compared to the abundance of firearms. Some people have multiple weapons at their residences. The abundance of firearms can lead to tragic events as they can be used to commit suicide.

El Paso County Office of Medical Examiner and Toxicology Laboratory is situated by the side of the Texas Tech University in the city centre in a nice location. There are three Medical Examiners including Chief Medical Examiner, Dr Mario Rascon and two Deputy Medical Examiners. All of them are very dedicated and helpful. They are willing to extend their help at any time when we need.

They have a very talented Forensic Photographer who taught a lot about Forensic Photography to me. Especially, the use of non-reflecting plates under the body to prevent the bouncing effect of light is fantastic. In addition, he uses a portable ladder and other simple cost-effective measures and instruments to improve the quality of his work.

Medical Examiners (Forensic Pathologists) perform complete autopsies or external examinations (dictated views). Examinations include all relevant ancillary tests while photographing all the important steps and storing relevant samples (universal sampling) including backup for further examination. This reduces the need for exhumation and the former chief pathologist (with great experience) had performed only two exhumations during his career. Here, the Medical Examiner decides the manner of death.

Every day, during morning conference, Medical Examiners discuss the scheduled cases for the day. In addition, the cases already done on the previous day are reviewed. Scene visit photographs, autopsy photographs and relevant full body x-rays are displayed in this meeting on a wide screen. During this session, there are very knowledgeable

discussions/dialogues on the relevant cases among the Pathologists, Fellows, Residents and Investigators. Attending the morning conference per se is a great learning experience for a trainee in forensic pathology.

If something is fallen on the floor, it is removed quickly to keep the floor clean and prevent morgue become an unpleasant and a messy place. The morgue manager is very dedicated and is always ready to assist the pathologists whenever the services are needed, especially after an autopsy.

The morgue staff comprises three attendants (autopsy technicians). One of them is a young girl, equally talented as the other two gentlemen. They are very dedicated, duty conscious and knowledgeable on the subject. It is very nice to see how they clean the dead bodies using soap spray and little amount of water. They don't allow to spill a drop of water or blood on the floor and even if it drops, clean it then and there, keeping the morgue clean and tidy. They clean the postmortem equipment soon after use thus, a little is remained to clean after the autopsy.

Clerical staff is very good and friendly. The Medico-legal Death Investigators are also very talented and knowledgeable on the subject and when they visit crime scenes, I accompany them.

The Medical Examiner has the sole authority to assume jurisdiction in each and every case reported to the Medical examiner's Office and decide on the type and the extent of autopsy examination (external examination with or without toxicology or full autopsy).

In all cases, the autopsy starts soon after finishing the basic investigations by law enforcement authorities, even before the establishment of identification and even in the absence of relatives. This allows better identification of injuries and organ pathology, rather than waiting to establish identity allowing putrefaction to settle in, which can lead to loss of valuable evidence. As stated earlier, the manner of death is decided by the Medical Examiner.

In the USA, we used to do pre-trial conferences either with State Prosecutors or defence Attorneys depending on their request. The meetings are held at the courts or Medical Examiner's office as pre-scheduled. Sometimes, this can be limited to a telephone conversation to clarify their doubts about the case.

During this meeting, the prosecution or defence ask questions from the pathologist to clarify their issues about the case, the autopsy report and the photographs taken by the Forensic Photographer. Photographs are shown on a wide TV screen. Although all the

photographs are used for this conversation, it is up to the judge to decide which photographs will be used for the trial. These pre-trial conferences are held in homicide and accidental deaths.

However, in Sri Lanka, the pathologist is expected to talk only with the State Counsel and it is empowered by a circular issued by the Attorney General's Department. It is usually held soon before the trial on the very first day of the trial. Pathologists are there to give their evidence based on the autopsy or clinical findings to establish the justice. As we provide scientific evidence based on the facts, this kind of restrictions might be unethical, and a violation of equal rights for the defence and their counsellors. I have observed this kind of pre-trial conferences in multiple cases and there is no hiding of facts. Therefore, my suggestion is to provide such services for the defence as well, in order for them to clarify their doubts and to reduce the unnecessary waste of the court hours. In Australia, this procedure is considered as precognition.

Giving evidence and answering the questions raised in the Courthouse is more or less similar to our setting, except for their comfortable surroundings. The pathologist uses a multimedia projector to explain the report and the photographs and the oral evidence are recorded. Sometimes, the jury is requested to leave the Courthouse due to the objections raised by defence attorneys.

I presume the most expensive health care service in the world is in the USA. You have to be very careful not to get sick as the healthcare and the medicine are super expensive.

The USA has one of the best death investigating systems in the world known to the local forensic fraternity as "Medical Examiner system". In conclusion, I recommend to future trainees from Sri Lanka to select the USA for your overseas post-MD training, which can be an experience of a lifetime!