

Sins of Our Fathers.

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Source: Archives of Pathology & Laboratory Medicine . Dec2009, Vol. 133 Issue 12, p1969-1974. 6p. 2 Color Plates

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Abstract:

Context.-Sir William Osler, MD, and Howard Kelly, MD, were probably the preeminent practitioners of their respective fields of internal medicine and gynecology, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Both were passionately interested in the field. Although not widely known, during the 1880s, both allegedly pioneered "arm's length" methods to perform covert autopsies. These techniques were allegedly used, at least occasionally, to circumvent autopsy-consent regulations and to obtain teaching specimens for medical museums. **Objective.**-To examine the historical evidence for these alleged behaviors within the context of (1) the need to obtain pathologic specimens for teaching gross pathology to medical trainees, (2) the loose interpretation of autopsy-consent regulations at the time, (3) the medical museum movement, and (4) the paternalistic approach to the practice of medicine in the late 19th century. **Design.**-To address these issues, standard historiographic methods were used to examine available primary and secondary historical sources. **Results.**-The evidence suggests that Kelly developed and published 3 arm's length autopsies while a resident in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and that both Kelly and Osler pioneered the use of these techniques in the 1880s. The brief history of these "minimally invasive" autopsy techniques is also examined by reviewing 19th century textbooks of autopsy technique. **Conclusions.**-Howard Kelly, MD, and William Osler, MD, pioneered arm's length covert autopsies. In fact, this activity appears to have initiated the 2 doctors' long professional relationship.

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