Sins of Our Fathers.

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Abstract:
Context.-Sir William Osler, MD, and Howard Kelly, MD, were probably the preeminent practitioners of their respective specialties, internal medicine and gynecology, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Both were passionately interested in pathology. Although not widely known, during the 1880s, both allegedly pioneered "arm's length" methods to perform covert autopsies that involved removing abdominal and even thoracic organs via the anus, vagina, or a small perineal incision hidden behind the scrotum. These techniques were allegedly used, at least occasionally, to circumvent autopsy-consent regulations and to procure teaching specimens for medical museums. Objective.-To examine the historical evidence for these alleged even these behaviors within the context of (1) the need to obtain pathologic specimens for teaching gross pathology: pathologic correlation to medical trainees, (2) the loose interpretation of autopsy-consent regulations at "charity hospitals" during the late 19th century, (3) the medical museum movement, and (4) the paternalistic approach to the practice of medicine typical of the times. 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 methods in the 1880s. The brief history of these "minimally invasive" autopsy techniques is also examined by reviewing 19th and 20th 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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