

UBC Department of Pathology: Early Years

Recollections from Peter Ommundsen

I had the good fortune to work for the Department of Pathology during the summers of 1958 -1960 as a lab assistant when I was a high school student, and here present some recollections from that perspective.

The department occupied some 4000 square feet of a single storey L-shaped hut (ex-army, ex-architecture program) at the northwest corner of Main Mall and University Boulevard, across the street from the old chemistry building. This was one of the “bus stop huts,” or “B” huts, with the pathology sections of the building designated B-3 and B-4. The ends of the arms of the “L” were assigned to other uses, a lecture theater (B-2) at the north end and the Kinsmen Laboratory of Neurological Research (B-5) at the west end.

The pathology wing fronting Main Mall included a histology lab, microscopy room, office of the departmental secretary, and office of the department head, Dr. Harold (Hal) Taylor. His office had doorways leading to the lecture theater, secretarial office, and histology lab. The University Boulevard wing included a biochemistry lab, electron microscope room, six offices, washroom, and animal room, which had a lab bench, sterilizer, and instrumentarium.



Entrance to Department of Pathology. UBC Archives UBC 1.1/2680.

Projects in that era included the study of osteolathyrism, amyloidosis, lupus histochemistry, autoimmunity in thyroiditis, and immunohistochemistry of granulation tissue.

My job was to care for the animals and otherwise assist in the various research projects with whatever was needed. The staff trained me in humane animal handling and restraint, sterile technique, tissue processing, microtomy, microscopy, and basics of histology and hematology. The lab assistant job did not pay well financially, but it was a windfall in terms of education. The staff knew that and generously involved me in a wide range of experiences.

The animal room housed mice, rats, and guinea pigs, but many rabbits and some guinea pigs were kept at the vivarium (also known as the “animal depot”) at 2372 Main Mall, near the corner of Main Mall and Agronomy Road. Countless trips were made by vehicle between the pathology hut and vivarium, and fortunately parking was readily available on University Boulevard beside the pathology hut, and the vivarium had a parking lot. For me, these trips involved assembling and transporting sterile equipment and accompanying researchers, then assisting them in the vivarium lab. Unknown to many, the vivarium had a security intercom between the lab and office, so I had to remember to caution people to be circumspect in their conversations. A few novice researchers had little experience handling animals, resulting in bites, urine-soaked clothing, and other mishaps.

The pathology department lacked an autoclave, having only an unpressurized instrument sterilizer about the size of a shoe box. A lever was employed to immerse an integral instrument tray in boiling water. Large objects and the occasional large instrument load were taken to the Wesbrook building for autoclaving. There were no disposable syringes and needles. All such equipment (glass and metal) was re-sterilized and reused, with needles resharpened on a whetstone. Nor were there vacuum tubes for sampling blood, and such work was done with syringes, some of which were rinsed with heparin. If control samples of human blood were needed, the hospital lab was phoned, or the senior technician had me withdraw a sample from him. On one occasion I discovered malarial parasites in a “normal” blood sample sent from the hospital!

Processing of tissues was a demanding task as there was no automation. Multiple manual changes of solutions were required, all scheduled with the use of timers. Sectioning was done with manual microtomes. Carbon dioxide was available for frozen sections. The lack of automation certainly provided me with a transparent learning opportunity in histological technique. Similarly, blood counts were done manually with a microscopic grid and mechanical tally counter, and differential counts were done using a microscope, blood smear, and tally counter.

Staff included Bev Twaites, the senior technician, Rilla Hendry, histology technician, Beverley Grimmer in the biochemistry lab and Kathy Morris in the departmental office.

Medical students on campus during summers included Ed Lipinsky, Helen Emmons, Vern Pankratz, and Mike O’Brien. I had many adventures with Mike, including travelling to a rabbit farm in Langley to harvest fresh rabbit tissue while rabbits were being butchered.

The west wing offices, with windows facing University Boulevard, were available to researchers, including pathologists and medical residents undertaking research projects required as part of their training. Some names of office occupants that come to mind are Yurika Shintani, Bill Chase, Earl Shepherd, Chinni Ramamurti and Sam McClatchie, perhaps the most colourful character in the department.

McClatchie was a science fiction author and widely traveled, an ex-army battalion surgeon, ex-air force flight surgeon, and a veteran of World War II and the Korean War. He had many stories and

had a knowledge of foreign languages that he would try out on foreign students that he encountered on the street.

There was a schedule for pathology residents to read microscope slides in the microscopy suite, and on one occasion I planted an anomalous slide on McClatchie's slide tray. That slide contained vividly stained insect tissue that I obtained from a dead fly, and when McClatchie encountered the slide there was great bafflement resulting in an amusing commotion.

Not all residents were pursuing pathology careers. Chinni Ramamurti was on campus to research bone histopathology in rats as part of his program in orthopedics, and one of my more unusual tasks was to assist him with orthopedic examinations of human patients in his office in the pathology hut! I held limbs at prescribed angles while he examined them.

Dr. Yurika Shintani was a researcher with a background in anatomy who had the office on the outside corner of the L-shaped building, facing both streets, and next to the animal room. Her husband, John, a dentist, was well known to us as he would often stop by the department. Yurika worked with radioisotopes and was diligent regarding workplace safety and decontamination.

Charles Culling, a guru of laboratory medicine, was based at Vancouver General Hospital, where I assisted periodically. Clarisse Aszkenazy-Dolman was in charge of the autopsy service there. The autopsies were performed largely by residents, but Dr. Aszkanazy-Dolman would occasionally stop by the autopsy room and intervene in an autopsy in progress, alarming the residents with her legendary aversion to the use of gloves, a habit that I certainly had occasion to witness.

I found all of these people to be friendly and helpful, and disagreements among them were rare. In 1958 we were given time off to watch Princess Margaret receive an honorary degree, which revealed an interesting schism between monarchists and antimonarchists, who stayed at work. Also, I became aware of ethical issues in medicine by observing some stark differences in professional judgement. Social events included an annual reception for the entire department hosted by Dr. Taylor at his home.

When the medical school abandoned the huts for better quarters, the huts were moved to the south of the zoology building and repurposed, including use as overflow for biological sciences. I studied wildlife biology under Ian McTaggart-Cowan, and as a graduate student had an office in the old medical school B hut that once housed the departments of anatomy and physiology. The huts survived for decades, they developed a reputation for a clubhouse atmosphere and inspired an ongoing annual tradition of a comedic UBC theatrical production named HUTS.

Working in the pathology labs was a great privilege and terrific education for me and I greatly appreciate the kindness, tutelage, and patience of all the wonderful people employed there.