

What is Pathology?

Pathology is the study of disease. Pathologists work with doctors and nurses in hospitals and GPs' surgeries to diagnose, treat and prevent illness.

Isn't it all about dead bodies?

No, but you wouldn't be alone if you thought this. In a recent survey, over two thirds of people thought that pathologists worked only with the dead, as shown in television programmes like CSI and Silent Witness. In fact, although some pathologists do perform autopsies (also called 'post mortems'), this is only a small proportion of their work and the majority of pathologists work for the benefit of living patients. Every time someone has a blood test, cervical smear or a lump removed, it's a pathologist who looks at the specimen to work out if there's any disease present or not.

The reality

Pathologists don't all do the same job. There are 19 different specialties, with their own training programmes and exams. Pathologists work in laboratories, in clinics and on hospital wards. You might meet some of them face to face, but others work behind the scenes, providing the information that other doctors need to make a diagnosis and decide what treatment to offer.

The importance of pathology

Millions of pathology tests are carried out every year – over 14 tests for every man, woman and child in the country. Many major advances have been made by pathologists, for example in the treatment of cancer, ensuring safe blood transfusions, developing vaccines against infectious diseases and the treatment of inherited conditions.

Did you know?

Pathology is involved in 70% of all diagnoses made in the NHS.



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