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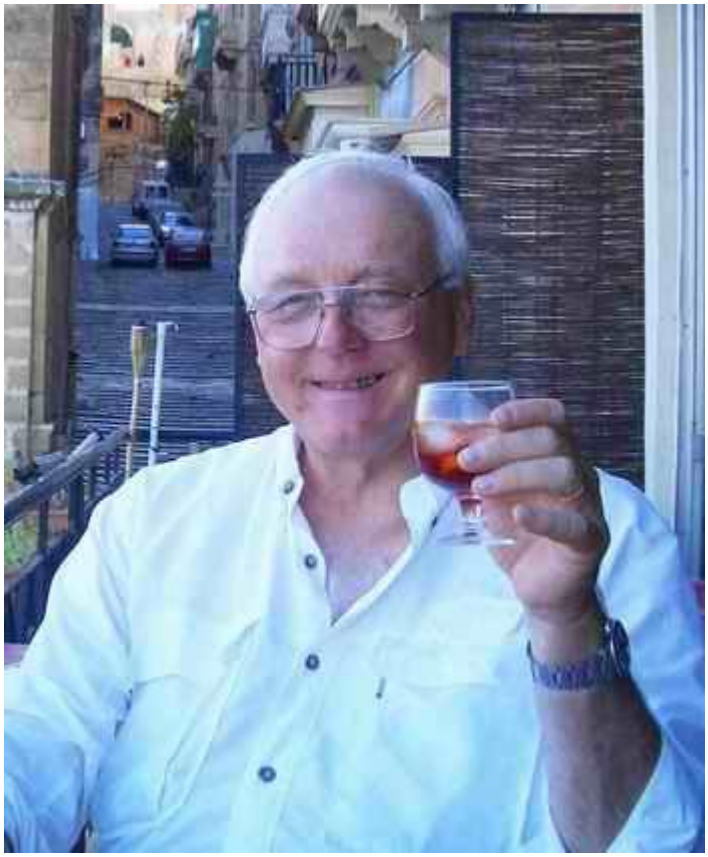
Interview with Jan Edward Leestma

Jan Leestma during a 2006 vacation in Malta (Click to enlarge)





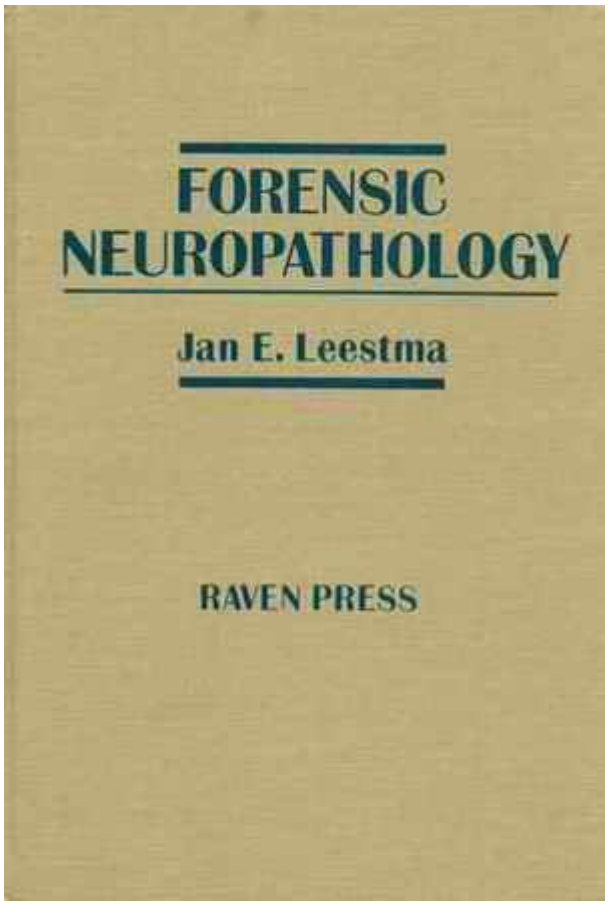
Dr. Leestma is a neuropathologist who has been involved for many years in forensic aspects of neuropathology and is the author of *Forensic Neuropathology* , published by Raven Press, NY, in 1988. Until recently this was the only book in print on the subject having succeeded a book by the

same name authored by Cyril Courville in the 1950's. A second edition is now in progress and will likely be published early in 2008 by Taylor & Francis (CRC Press).

Dr. Leestma was born November 30, 1938 in Michigan . He is of Dutch ancestry and attended Hope College in Holland , Michigan graduating with a B.A. degree in Chemistry and Biology in 1960. He attended the University of Michigan School of Medicine, graduating in 1964. He pursued a residency in Anatomic Pathology and Neuropathology at the University of Colorado School of Medicine in Denver , 1964-67. He completed his Neuropathology training at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, the Bronx , NY, in 1968. He served with the United States Air Force Medical Corps at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington , D.C. from 1968 until 1971 and was honorably discharged with the rank of Major, USAF MC.

Dr. Leestma joined the faculty of Northwestern University Medical School in 1971 and remained on the faculty until 1985 having served as an Associate Professor of Pathology and Neurology, Chief of Neuropathology at Northwestern Memorial Hospital and at the Children's Memorial Hospitals in Chicago. He was a guest researcher at the Karolinska Institutet (Huddinge University Hospital) in Stockholm , Sweden (1981-82). While on Northwestern's faculty he attended the J.L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management in its Executive Managers' Program gaining the Masters of Management Degree in 1986. He also served as an Assistant Medical Examiner at the Cook County Medical Examiner's office as the consultant neuropathologist for 11 years and as a consultant to the Institute of Forensic Sciences in San Juan , PR. He also served as Professor of Pathology and Neurology and an Associate Dean with the Division of the Biological Sciences and the Pritzker School of Medicine at the University of Chicago from 1985 to 1987 when he became the Neuropathologist and Associate Medical Director of the Chicago Institute of Neurosurgery and Neuroresearch (CINN) at the Columbus Hospital in Chicago . Between 1987 and 1994 CINN became the largest neurosurgical practice in Illinois and the region with more than 25 neurosurgeons on its staff. CINN operated as a part of its stereotactic radiosurgery section, the third Gamma Knife ® in the United States and pioneered in the development of sophisticated dose-planning software. Dr. Leestma retired from hospital/institutional practice in 2004.

Forensic Neuropathology (Raven Press, 1988), the best selling book by Leestma. Click cover to buy from Amazon



Dr. Leestma is the author of more than 100 professional publications including his *Forensic Neuropathology* text. He has written book chapters for Anderson 's Textbook of Pathology and another general pathology text by Brunson & Gall (both with F.K. Mostofi). He authored a chapter on viral infections of the nervous system in Davis & Robertson's *Textbook of Neuropathology* (Williams & Wilkins) through two editions. He has authored other book chapters on forensic neuropathology issues for *Pediatric Neuropathology* edited by S. Duckett (Williams & Wilkins, 1995), for *Neuropathology: the Diagnostic Approach* edited by J.Garcia (CV Mosby, 1997), for *Pathology of the Aging Brain* edited by S. Duckett and J. de la Torre (Oxford University Press, 2001), and for *Clinical Guide to Brain Death* edited by E.F.M Wijdicks (Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins, 2001). He also authored three chapters for *Epilepsy and Sudden Death* , edited by C.M. Lathers and P.L. Schrader (Marcel Dekker, 1990). His other publications span the areas of brain and other neoplasms, axoplasmic transport, sudden death and epilepsy, viral diseases of the nervous system, and most recently brain injuries in child abuse cases.

Dr. Leestma has been a consultant in legal cases involving forensic issues in neuropathology for over 30 years having testified in a number of high profile cases, most notably the so-called "nanny" case (Commonwealth v. Louise Woodward) in Cambridge , MA . He has had the privilege to work with many notable attorneys and forensic experts over the years. He is a member of the American Association of Neuropathologists and the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. He current serves on the editorial board of the American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology and is an ad-hoc reviewer for a number of other medical journals.

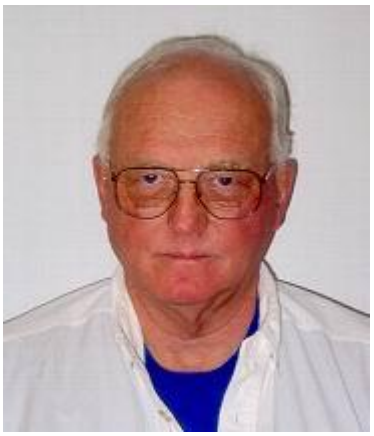
Dr. Leestma is married and has two grown daughters and two grand children.He makes his home in Chicago . His hobbies and non-medical interests include amateur radio (licensed at age 16), photography, drawing and water color, metal working, skiing and world travel. He is still actively

engaged in his forensic neuropathology consulting practice and with a biotechnology-drug development company which he co-founded.

We at the "*Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology*" became interested in his work mainly because of his seminal work on Forensic Neuropathology. We approached him for an online interview and he graciously agreed. The interview was conducted by the editor-in-chief Dr. Anil Aggrawal for well over two months. Some excerpts....)

Q. Forensic Neuropathology has been your classical contribution to our field. Tell us something about it. How did you conceive the idea? How much time did you take to write it?

Leestma's Superlatives



Jan is an amazing personality with so many facets. We requested him to answer some questions in short, so our readers could know him better. Here in a very short question and answer session you get to know Leestma better:

First award : Expository reading in the 6th grade.

First book: Dr. Doolittle.

Greatest Love of my life: Learning.

I am superstitious about: Not much.

I hate: Dishonesty, stupidity and arrogance.

My best case:: Commonwealth of Massachusetts v. Louise Woodward.

My biggest assets: Persistence and self examination.

My biggest fear: : Dementia.

My Birthday: November 30, 1938.

My favorite possession: My library.

My favorite quote: "Always do right. This will gratify some and amaze the rest" - Mark Twain

My greatest extravagance: A great wine.

My greatest necessity: A library and a computer.

My greatest regret: I never got to hear/see Stefan Grapelli perform.

My Hero: Thomas Jefferson.

My idea of perfect happiness: A job well done.

My most overrated virtue: Overwork.

My passion: Figuring things out.

My spice: Good cooking.I love garlic.

My strength: A world view.

My wildest fantasy: Teleportation.

Place Of Birth: Flint, Michigan.

Real Name: you see is what you get.

Thing closest to my heart: My children and grand kids.

What touches me most: When people, despite temptations to the contrary do what is right, even though it costs them.

Where do I see myself five years down the line: I hope to be doing pretty much the same things as I am doing now but with a little more time off for play.

A. I was aware of the book by Cyril Courville from Los Angeles that was published in 1964 and dropped out of sight relatively quickly. Other than the chapter by Richard Lindenberg in Fisher and Spitz's Medical Legal Investigation of Death there was not much regarding forensic aspects of neuropathology in the literature. Having had the opportunity to attend a number of the brain cutting conferences of Dr. Lindenberg in Baltimore in the late 1960's I became impressed with the wealth of teaching material that abounded in a Medical Examiner's setting. After taking up my duties at Neuropathology Chief at Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago in 1971 I experienced a rapid fall-off in the autopsy rate in the next several years and sought out Dr. Robert J. Stein, the first Medical Examiner in the new office in Chicago. Thus began a formal connection with forensic pathology and the wealth of brain pathology there. I knew that one day I might try to write a book with all this great material as its base. It happened that in the years of 1982-1987 I had the opportunity to devote a great deal of time to writing this book and it was ultimately published by Raven Press in New York in 1988.

Q. How many copies of this book have been sold around the world?

A. I am not exactly sure but I estimate that over 10,000 copies were eventually sold. One can usually find the book in most medical libraries in major institutions world-wide.

Q. How did you do research for this book? Any interesting experiences?

A. Being the main consultant in Neuropathology for the Cook County Medical Examiner I had access to autopsy material in excess of 5000 cases per year. As the pathologists at the ME's office became aware of my presence and the value that neuropathology expertise could bring to their work I had no shortage of brains to examine. They had a great photography staff present and thus material could be documented and photos preserved. This formed a base for several papers on sudden death in epilepsy that came from the Office as well as forming a rich collection that I utilized when writing my book.

Of course there was a great deal of literature to explore and fortunately I had many good library resources at my disposal thus personal experience was enhanced by scholarship which has paid off. My exposure to many interesting and sometimes notorious cases added an element of excitement not generally a part of hospital neuropathology practice. Contacts that developed in the course of my 11 years with the ME lead inexorably into my private consulting practice and further contact with some of the great forensic pathologists and attorneys in the United States and elsewhere.

Q. What do you love most (besides your professional work and writing of course)?

A. I have a number of "outside" interests that rise and fall in interest and importance. These include amateur radio. I received my first license at the age of about 16 years. My first equipment was home built and sometimes worked. I recall contacting on what is now the Citizen's Band (27 Mhz) but was then an amateur band a Russian station only a day or two after an agreement was reached that permitted such contacts. I also recall contacting a station in South Africa while demonstrating radio communication at my High School Physics class using about 10 watts of output into a wire hanging into a metal dust bin. Amateur radio has evolved of course and now nearly 50 years after my first license I still enjoy the unexpected. I like to travel and have visited well more than 100 countries over the years, the most recent were Uruguay, Argentina and Antarctica. Art has always interested me and I struggle to get better at pencil drawing, water color, acrylics, and metal work. I love to cook and like to experiment with ethnic and regional cuisines and do most of the cooking at home. My wife is an excellent cook but I beat her to it most nights.

Q. Your favorite dish, book, movie, star, person?

A. I dearly love to eat and make Bouillabaisse and there is nothing like outdoor grilling also. I like to read "pot boilers" and adventure novels.they help pass the time on airplanes and in airports. Favorite authors are Stuart Woods, Robert K. Tannenbaum (I did a case with him), Martin Cruz Smith, John Le Carre and Patricia Cornwell, Alexander McCall Smith, to name a few. I generally don't go to movies for lack of time but have enjoyed the Star Wars series, Jurassic Park, the Harry Potter series and any movie with Jack Nicholson in it.

...over 10,000 copies of my book were eventually sold. One can usually find the book in most medical libraries in major institutions world-wide...

Q. What do you dislike most?

A. I detest dishonesty in any form, especially intellectual dishonesty. Unfortunately I witness a great deal of this in the work that I do (forensic consulting) on the part of people who should know better and be better, but they don't or can't.

Q. What do you consider as your biggest achievement in life?

A. My contributions to medical knowledge in the form of shedding light into a few dark corners and trying to do the right thing.

Q. If God asked you choose your profession again, what would it be and why?

A. I only know the pathway I took and for better or worse I suppose I would chose this again, though it is not at all certain that I could do today what I did over the years. The world has changed significantly and many of the resources I had don't exist anymore. There is no doubt I would choose a profession probably in the sciences or some area that bridges science and the humanities.

Whatever it might be, there has to be some measure of output or change personally and in a larger sense at the end of it all.

Q. Have you ever traveled to India, or to Indian subcontinent? Would you like to visit, if such an opportunity arose?

A. Yes, I've been to India a couple of times enjoying Mumbai and Kerala State. I would like to see Rajasthan. If given an opportunity of course I would like to visit.

...fortunately I had many good library resources at my disposal thus personal experience was enhanced by scholarship which has paid off. My exposure to many interesting and sometimes notorious cases added an element of excitement not generally a part of hospital neuropathology practice...

Q. What has been your biggest failure/disappointment?

A. I've been fortunate in not having had any major failure in my life. I am blessed with a loving family who have all turned out well (not always as expected however). My career has taken my twists and turns but turned out well. The major disappointments I experience are the outcomes in some legal cases where it appears logic has been turned on its head or the trier of fact simply got it wrong and somebody who probably doesn't belong in prison is going to be there for a long time. These experiences are very very difficult to accept.

Q. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be, and why?

A. I would slow down and play more. Play activity, in whatever form, is tremendously invigorating and refreshing and may take you to places you never expected.

Q. If you could change one thing about your family, what would it be, and why?

A. I would like to be geographically closer to my two daughters and grand kids. The family is just fine and doing what they are supposed to be doing.

...In history Abraham Lincoln stands out because of his strong moral and ethical principles, his superb mind and a talent for writing and saying important things succinctly...

Q. Which living person do your admire most? Which person in entire history? Why?

A. There are so many who combine intelligence, wit, grit, and philosophical principles. In history Abraham Lincoln stands out because of his strong moral and ethical principles, his superb mind and a talent for writing and saying important things succinctly.

Q. What is your life's *mantra*?

A. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you

Q. In one line, how would you best describe yourself?

A. A fortunate person.

Q. Are you interested in Science Fiction? Do you think SF is a good means to teach science to children?

A. I've loved science fiction since I could first be able to read (Heinlein, Asimov, etc.). Anything that can kindle one's imagination and inspire one to seek and learn is a good thing. Lots of things were once "science fiction" and are now "science fact". One must not forget, however, fiction is one thing and science another.

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Q. Any awards?

A. Outstanding teacher of the year in the basic sciences, Northwestern University Medical School.

Q. If you were marooned on a desert island, who/what would you like to be marooned with and why?

A. A large library and a few tools. With information and a few tools, one has the potential to create a whole world and never be bored.

Q. What do you do first thing in the morning?

A. Reflect on my dreams.

Q. ...and the last thing at night?

A. I don't remember.

...I enjoy reading, drawing, and doing cross-word puzzles while sitting on a beach. There are always projects to do: building things, repairing things, learning new things...

Q. Who/what would you like to be born as in your next birth?

A. Someone who could be fortunate enough to learn quickly and think deeply.

Q. If you were allowed a choice to live in one era of time (past, present or future), which one will you chose and why?

A. The period from the middle 1800's until the early 1900's has always fascinated me. Great things were happening in the sciences and arts in Europe and the great cities were in full flower.

Q. What do you do in your spare time? Your hobbies, interests?

A. I enjoy reading, drawing, and doing cross-word puzzles while sitting on a beach. There are always projects to do: building things, repairing things, learning new things.

Q. Are you religious? If yes, how do you reconcile religion with science, which is your profession?

A. I am not a fan of organized religion though I am a spiritual person. I have no conflict between science and general religious principles of the World's major religions. Science demands the ability to measure and test things. Religion goes to another place. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's".

...My advice to youngsters? Well, learn as much as one can from whomever and whatever one can. Practice scholarship and life-long learning. Find the road less traveled and journey on...

Q. If a youngster wanted to take up forensic neuropathology as a career, how should he proceed?

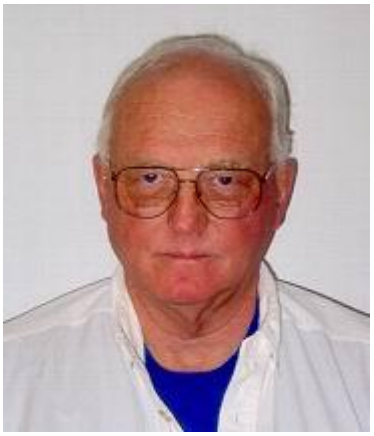
A. Learn as much as one can from whomever and whatever one can. Practice scholarship and life-long learning. Find the road less traveled and journey on.

Q. Your favorite authors/books?

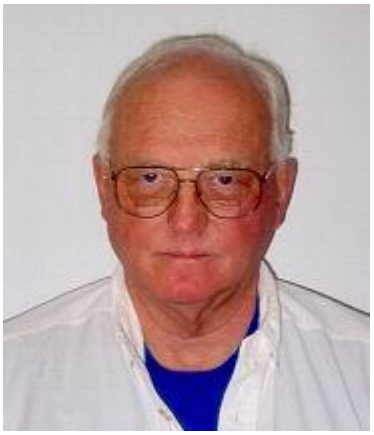
A. There are too many to name.

Q. Any message for our readers?

A. One of the most challenging aspects of pathology is in forensics. One can and should be constantly challenged by the puzzles one encounters and the gaps and misperceptions of knowledge that exist. There is an endless opportunity to analyze, test, discover, and put things right (often not without great resistance). The things one encounters often puts one into conflict with social norms, politics, basic principles of human rights and decency and offers the opportunity to be a witness for the rights of others and the truth, however inconvenient it might be for some. There are dangers which must be faced and hopefully overcome. Perhaps the world will be a better place because of this work at the end of it all.



Jan Leestma can be approached via E-mail at JLeestma@aol.com.



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