



## Expert's book indicts profession

*Medical examiner cites 'conspiracy of ignorance' in autopsy of John F. Kennedy*

By James E. Fowler  
Correspondent

When Dr. Michael M. Baden was on George Putnam's radio talk show recently here in Los Angeles — some callers inevitably asked about the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

As head of the forensic pathology team of the House Select Committee on Assassinations in the late 1970s, Baden spent many hours studying the autopsy reports, photographs and X-rays that have baffled investigators and tantalized conspiracy buffs for more than 25 years.

A staff member of Baden's public relations firm laughingly complained about conspiracy "nuts," but Baden was more gracious.

Although he believes the medical evidence available supports the official Warren Report theory of one assassin/two bullets, Baden concedes that the government's autopsy of the fallen president performed at Bethesda Naval Hospital was botched — but he doesn't believe that was part of any cover-up or conspiracy.

"There wasn't a conspiracy of assassins (at the autopsy), there was a conspiracy of ignorance," Baden said. "The ignorance that was present in the autopsy of President Kennedy was the kind of ignorance that pervades the (medical examiner) system — that happened every day in communities all across the United States in 1963 and still goes on today."

It is the medical examiner system that is the subject of Michael Baden's book, "Unnatural Death — Confessions of a Medical Examiner," co-written with Judith Adler Hennessee and published by Random House.

Baden said the average unnatural death autopsy in the United States is handled much like the one performed on Kennedy in 1963 by the Navy.

"It's assumed that the normal procedure would have been to do it right," Baden said, "but the normal procedure is to do a poor autopsy by people not trained."

That realization, he said, makes the Kennedy autopsy less drama-

tic, but actually more troublesome.

In his book, Baden peppers the indictment of the medical examiner system with sometimes grisly anecdotes about the famous, the infamous and the not-so-famous garnered from his years of experience as a medical examiner and told with a light, wry touch.

Baden worked for the city of New York as an examiner for more than 25 years. He was the chief medical examiner of New York City from 1978 until he was unceremoniously fired by Mayor Ed Koch. He is currently the co-director of the forensic sciences unit of the New York State Police. His opinions are sought by attorneys from around the country in criminal and civil matters.

Baden said the system in the United States has been undermined by the lack of doctors properly trained to do forensic pathology and also by frequent political interference in the work of the medical examiner office.

"The biggest problem is the lack of physicians who are qualified to be doing unnatural death investigations," Baden said, "and the politics is a big reason for that."

In his book, Baden says that it is a rare examiner who manages to stay out of trouble for any length of time and still maintain independence.

He said that was the reason Thomas Noguchi in Los Angeles, Werner Spitz in Detroit, Cyril Wecht in Pittsburgh, and himself and others in New York City were all fired as chief medical examiners.

Even among doctors, Baden said, pathologists have traditionally been the whistle blowers.

"Pathologists were the guys who said 'hey, you did it wrong,'" he said. "You took out the ovary when you should have taken out the appendix."

Baden said when the examiner performs that traditional role in the public/political arena it sometimes leads to findings that are not popular with politicians.

Baden said the tendency to be judged on the basis of being a team player rather than being a scientist

is one of the most discouraging features for young doctors thinking of going into the field of forensic pathology.

"They're (the politicians) looking to get their programs through and to get re-elected, and that's not our goal — our goal is to call it the way we see it."

Baden offers no easy solutions for the problems of the medical examiner system in the United States. He said first the field of forensic medicine must be made more attractive to medical students.

Baden said salaries for medical examiners must be improved, though he acknowledged they cannot be expected to reach the level of private medical practice. He also said there should be some kind of protection for the medical examiner to be able to act on the basis science without fear of reprisal.

"Medical examiners shouldn't be immunized from any accountability," he said, "but they should be held accountable in medical and scientific ways — not political ways."

Baden offers the British system as an example the United States might follow. In Britain, the examiner is "more of an academic, with his roots in the medical school," Baden said. This provides three benefits: It permits the doctor to be judged by his medical peers, not his political ones; it permits him to get a better salary since it is also a teaching position; and it allows him to be exposed to medical students and to act as a role model for future examiners.

Forensic medicine, he said, is "a field where you can do a lot of public good. It's a field that's exciting, developing all the new DNA fingerprinting and a lot of interesting things."

In a final word about the Kennedy autopsy, Baden said that those innocent mistakes, but mistakes nevertheless, by the Navy pathologists have caused confusion that is going to be with us a very long time.