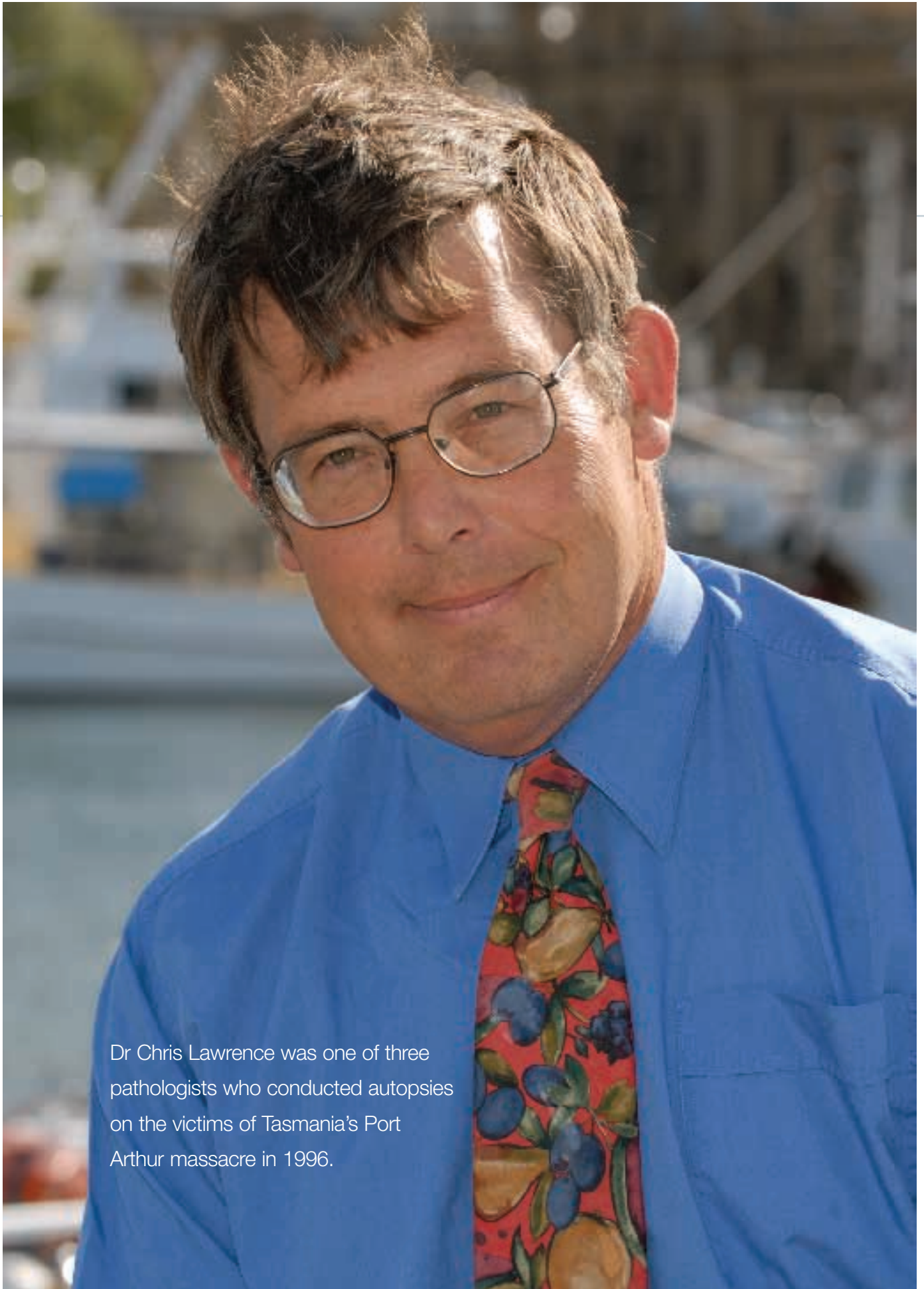


PROFILE



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Sleuth with a scalpel

FORENSIC PATHOLOGY HAS A HIGH PUBLIC PROFILE THANKS TO CRIME NOVELS AND TV SHOWS. IN THE REAL WORLD, THE SPECIALTY HAS TAKEN DR CHRIS LAWRENCE FROM ROUTINE AUTOPSIES TO HELPING GATHER EVIDENCE OF WAR CRIMES, WRITES PAM RACHOOTIN.

PHOTOGRAPHER: TONY MCKENDRICK

Dr Chris Lawrence has been caught up in the aftermath of some of the most dramatic national and international events of recent years. It isn't an interest in touring trouble spots that has brought this about, but his knowledge and skills as a forensic pathologist.

While working in the US, Dr Lawrence, now the director of forensic medical services in Tasmania, developed expertise in forensic anthropology and gained extensive experience in autopsies involving gunshot wounds. This knowledge has been put to good use.

He was one of three pathologists who conducted autopsies on the victims of Tasmania's Port Arthur massacre in 1996. In 1998 he worked as chief pathologist for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in Bosnia, where he exhumed and examined 900 of the 7500 victims of the Srebrenica massacre.

He later gave evidence at the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague in the trial of General Radislav Krstic, who was convicted of genocide and sentenced to 46 years in prison. Dr Lawrence found this legal work particularly rewarding.

Where hostilities have descended into the barbarity of a massacre, the way to approach the evidence is "one body at a time", he says.

"You have to prove every single one. If they are in a mass grave, it's easy, but in places like Kosovo, where they are all buried in single graves, you have to look at each one and determine whether there is enough evidence.

"If you don't get a good nexus between your investigation and your exhumation and autopsy process, then the exhumation is useless. So it's got to be done very thoroughly, and it's an incredibly expensive process."

Ironically, it is the more routine and predictable elements of the job that helped lead Dr Lawrence into pathology. He decided to specialise in the field as it is often more family friendly than other disciplines. Having said that, the 48-year-old married father of three laughs at how he has ended up in forensic pathology, the area with the most after-hours work.

"My job is a little bit unusual in that I am the only forensic pathologist in Tasmania, so I am on call 24/7, which can be a bit of a burden," he says. "Routinely, I start about 8.30. Traditionally the autopsies have been done in the morning, so the first thing I do is go down to the mortuary."

He might have no autopsies or up to four a day. "Four is quite a lot. The straightforward autopsies take about an hour. The more complicated ones can take up to four hours, so things can vary from being pretty quiet to being full on for most of the day."

Keeping fit helps in coping with the rigours of what is a stressful job, he says.

"You do a lot of courtroom work. People always want answers immediately. You get called out at all sorts of odd and irregular intervals. Most of your homicides are going to occur on weekends and at night, so there can be a period where you don't have a lot of control over your life."

According to his colleague, Dr Jo Duflou, who worked with him and knows his family, "He is very much a family man with outside interests, which include his farm. I think the secret is to have a life outside work, a supportive family, and an ability to switch off when you get home."

Dr Lawrence's approach to investigating a possible homicide is "just like any other form of medical examination. You take a history (from others) and then you perform an examination. I basically try to prove or disprove the story that I am being told (by the police). Does the objective evidence in front of me match what I am being told? Do I need to get further information, or is, indeed, the history wrong?"

"In cases of a homicide, I would be called out to the scene to do some preliminary assessment ... With a bit of experience you can tell the police whether or not it's suspicious, what might be the cause of death, or, at the very least, what they need to do to sort it out."

Teamwork is vital. "You are only as good as the detectives, the crime scene investigators, the coroner's officers, and the doctors involved. The autopsy is really good for checking facts, but in terms of trying to work out exactly what happened... if you don't have enough information, you can't make an assessment.

"We recently had a double murder up in the north of Tasmania where there was an unknown assailant. What eventually turned out is that we were able to identify traces of the weapon in the two (victims),

It's not just the murders; he has also dealt with media frenzies, such as the one surrounding the autopsy on Michael Hutchence, the lead singer of INXS.

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"The work in Bosnia sticks in my mind as really special. Things like the Port Arthur Massacre, too. Disasters stand out because they are moments of such high drama."

In 2001, Dr Lawrence's work took him to East Timor, where he examined the remains of victims of the civil unrest that followed the elections there.

Oddly enough, it is not the massacres and disasters that he finds most psychologically demanding. "The stressful periods are often far more mundane, where you are just trying to cope with ordinary work days, and not ever being able to complete anything to your satisfaction — where there are constant demands for your attention from multiple different sources."

He has had difficulty finding another forensic pathologist to assist him but has just been successful in recruiting one from the US.

He says the homicide rate in Australia has been steady for the past 100 years. However, there has been an increase in detection of child homicide. "Child abuse cases are really tragic, and they are really very hard to do and to take through court... but they are enormously important."

Dr Lawrence's work has also impacted on consumer safety, for instance in the case of all-terrain vehicles (four-wheel motorbikes), which were involved in seven deaths in Tasmania in 18 months.

"When I started doing forensics, the three-wheeled motorbikes were common, and there was a big court case in America where they agreed to withdraw them from the market because they tended to roll over. What is interesting is that now the four-wheeled vehicles are doing the same thing."

He has alerted farmers and farmers' organisations to this danger and is making manufacturers aware of the safety issue.

While he is not out directly saving individual lives, Dr Lawrence says a lot of what forensic pathologists do is geared to preventing further deaths, and that is a source of satisfaction.

He says it is sad to see how many deaths are caused by what he calls "criminal stupidity" — especially young people doing things where they just didn't anticipate the consequences of their action. "They say of the forensic pathologist, that he knows everything one day too late."

Dr Lawrence studied law after becoming a forensic pathologist, but doesn't think that is a requirement. "You tend to learn about the areas of your own expertise. As one lawyer said to me once, 'You've been in court about murders far more times than I have been, so you tend to know what you are talking about, and I don't.'"

Ultimately, he had to decide which discipline he wanted to pursue. "Forensic pathology is far more interesting than the law," he says.

Dr Lawrence has a special interest in diving-related deaths. "They are very difficult to investigate ... It is an odd environment, under water using compressed air. It produces odd results, and you have to be involved in diving to understand what is going on." He has been a diver since 1977.

He also is intrigued by sudden deaths during sport, many of which are due to

cardiac arrhythmias inherited as a dominant trait.

"In forensics, weird things tend to happen slightly more commonly than you'd expect... Coronial cases tend to be strange and unusual. The older I get, the more careful I am never to say 'never', and never to say 'always'. I have been surprised in the past. Someone who has accidentally fallen on a spike that has gone through their brain, a man driving a car where the gear stick has gone through his heart, very, very strange occurrences that you wouldn't anticipate happening, but occasionally do occur."

"On a regular basis, from the history I'm given, I try to guess what the cause of death is, and then do the autopsy. The only problem is it is only possible to get 60 to 70 per cent accuracy. I am nearly always surprised by what I find at autopsy. You can't even anticipate which case you are likely to get wrong."

He warns that "in a period where you do have more objections to autopsy, it is one of those difficult balancing acts. It could be the family who is objecting to the autopsy, or it could also be a perpetrator."

He and his colleagues run the only short forensic pathology course in Australia. He confesses he is a tad didactic. He likes teaching, but there are times when he finds some of the modern teaching philosophies frustrating.

Dr Allan Cala, a forensic pathologist who is also involved in teaching the course, rates Dr Lawrence as one of the top three or four forensic pathologists in the country. "I would reject one of his opinions at my peril. He is very knowledgeable, and a really nice bloke."

Dr Lawrence says forensics has gone through a down period but things are looking up. "There are trainees coming through, and I'm very glad, but we still need to keep up the hard work and support the people in this profession." 📌