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Persistently Curious, Insistently Rigorous

The bottom line is patient safety right now.

Transformational pathologists have an attitude of aptitude. Whether they are planning a morbidity and mortality conference or partnering to generate support for a new telepathology system, they're engaged in the work, committed to their patients, and open to suggestion.

For example, when Richard N. Eisen, MD, FCAP, came to Greenwich Hospital in Greenwich, Connecticut, 16 years ago, immunohistochemistry was outsourced to a reference lab. Six months after he had arrived, an immunohistochemistry laboratory was up and running.

Six months after that, the chief of oncology asked him about starting both a weekly multidisciplinary tumor board involving pathology, radiology, surgery, oncology, and nursing. He has directed the conference since its inception, presenting the pathologic findings of cases. Currently, Dr. Eisen now shares this responsibility with a colleague who joined the pathology department a few years ago. He also has presented pathologic findings at the monthly mortality and morbidity conference, where he teaches medical residents and at a monthly tumor conference, where two cancer patients are presented and discussed in greater depth than at tumor board. These innovations helped Greenwich Hospital continue to maintain accreditation from the American College of Surgeons as an accredited cancer center. Today, Dr. Eisen is again on the planning team pursuing separate accreditation from the American College of Surgeons for its breast cancer treatment center. As part of that process, the conference for breast cancer cases has been separated from the general tumor board.

There are 180 beds at Greenwich Hospital, which is part of the Yale New Haven Health System. Dr. Eisen, who is also a clinical associate professor at the Yale University School of Medicine, is one of seven pathologists on staff. Officially, he directs the anatomic pathology section, specifically focusing on surgical pathology, including histology and immunohistochemistry. He also performs some autopsy work, and he is the pathologist most involved in teaching. But, well, he likes start-ups.

For example, he is much engaged in a partnership with oncology colleagues to install and expand their new telepathology system. The equipment is set up to archive images of pathology and cytology cases; it's a great teaching tool. "Any physicians with privileges can view them," Dr. Eisen said. "It has helped us to develop great relations with our surgeons, radiation therapists, radiologists, and oncologists."

“Getting more senior people to use new technologies is always more of a challenge in medicine than those who are more recently graduated from training,” Dr. Eisen observed, but hands-on learning makes the new toys irresistible. “We show them the images and how to interpret and use digital slide image,” he said. “It’s often one-on-one. Educating people is about showing them that this can be a useful tool for patient care and saying, ‘I think this is an improvement and enhancement to our service. Let’s use it.’”

Most recently, Dr. Eisen’s attention has turned to computerized labeling systems. “We’ve had conversations with the administration and will be bringing in a bar coding system for pathology specimens,” he said. “It will enable us to have higher throughput, produce our slides faster, and be a great patient safety tool.”

“The bottom line is patient safety right now,” he continued, warming to his subject. “This will reduce errors in slide labeling and improve turnaround. It all adds up to quality improvement and cost savings for the hospital.”

This mindset is no doubt one reason why Dr. Eisen was recently selected by the American Cancer Society to receive a Star of Hope Award, which recognizes physicians who “demonstrate excellence in providing compassionate and skilled care for people facing cancer and their unyielding contribution in the cancer fight.”

It’s all about that attitude of aptitude.