



Ossama Tawfik, MD, PhD, FCAP

A Persistent Interest in Patient Benefit

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Ossama W. Tawfik, MD, PhD, FCAP, vice chairman and director of anatomic and surgical pathology at the University of Kansas School of Medicine, is a professor of pathology and OBGYN as well as director of the tumor repository at the Kansas Center Institute. A teacher, clinician, and researcher, he has a natural affinity for technology and a persistent interest in deriving maximum patient benefit from the tools and talents at hand.

Dr. Tawfik specializes in surgical and cytopathology. He earned his PhD in the immunology of pregnancy and has taken a particular interest in gynecologic pathology ever since. Every week, Dr. Tawfik presents interesting and challenging current cases in a meeting with OBGYN residents. “Working with the OBs and GYNs in the department and teaching residents over the years, you become more and more the go-to person for challenging cases in GYN pathology,” he says. “The more you see, the better you get.”

“It’s very important to love what you do,” Dr. Tawfik says, “and to me, pathology is one of the most exciting disciplines in medicine. It used to be that we’d just give a diagnosis, but nowadays we are more involved with management of the patient and not just the patient’s diagnosis.”

Dr. Tawfik takes full advantage of the direct patient care opportunities via what they call “cytology on wheels”—bringing fine-needle aspiration (FNA) to patients at various clinics throughout the hospital. When residents assist, he stresses that the pathologist who conducts an FNA has both clinical and technical responsibilities. “We preach to them about the importance of our interaction with the patient and with the clinicians,” he says. “Your patients need to feel comfortable. There is an explanation for what you are doing—an explanation of the goals and an explanation that you are part of a team that is hoping to take care of them. It is not just technique. Very importantly, you have to put them at ease and build rapport.”

No less critical to successful FNA is clear, concise, and thoughtful follow-up with treating physicians. “This is how to relay the message of good news, how to relay the message of bad news, what to say and what not to say,” he tells his residents. It is important to him that his residents appreciate the importance of clarity and specificity in every single word they say and write.

Nowhere is Dr. Tawfik's commitment to communication more evident than in the weekly pathology/radiology videoconference. Every Friday morning, Dr. Tawfik and Mark Redick, MD, PhD, an assistant professor of radiology in the medical center's Section of Breast Imaging (whose office is more than a mile away) meet online to review state-of-the-art digitized images of radiographs and tissue slides processed that week. The two can see and talk to one another while manipulating the shared images in real time. When their initial diagnoses diverge, they agree on the best ways to further investigate until diagnostic concurrence is achieved.

"I am in academia because I love doing research, coming up with ideas, making a difference," Dr. Tawfik says. He regrets that there is not more time for basic science research, but he recognizes that the pathologist has a unique and critical bridge responsibility. "The niche for the pathologist," he says, "is to be the key player in any translational research. The basic scientist cannot do it without us, the research clinicians cannot do it without us, and so pathologists really are key players for the translational type of research from bench work to patient's bed. We are key players in making this happen."

A May 2009 story about the weekly pathology/radiology videoconference at University of Kansas Medical Center, "Talk to me: AP, radiology meet in virtual middle," is available in the online edition of CAP TODAY.