Cytopathology

Professional Description, provided by the Graduate Medical Education directory 2011-12

A cytopathologist is an anatomic pathologist trained in the diagnosis of human disease by means of the study of cells obtained from body secretions and fluids by scraping, washing, or sponging the surface of a lesion, or by the aspiration of a tumor mass or body organ with a fine needle.

A major aspect of a cytopathologist’s practice is the interpretation of Papanicolaou-stained smears of cells from the female reproductive systems (i.e., the Pap test). However, the cytopathologist’s expertise is applied to the diagnosis of cells from all systems and areas of the body. The cytopathologist is a consultant to all medical specialists.

Overview, provided by the American Society of Cytopathology

Cytopathology is a diagnostic technique that examines cells from various body sites to determine the cause or the nature of disease. The first cytopathology test developed was the Pap test which has been widely utilized in the last 50 years for screening and diagnosing of cervical cancer and its precursors. The Pap test is considered the most successful screening test in medical history.

Since the development of the Pap test, the practice of cytopathology has expanded to include samples from nearly all body sites. Cell samples are taken for analysis as part of many diagnostic tests such as bronchoscopy or cystoscopy. In addition, nearly any tissue mass can be sampled and diagnosed by fine needle aspiration biopsy. In this procedure, cells are aspirated from masses just below the skin in the doctor’s office or during a radiologic examination. This approach allows diagnosis of a lesion with minimal discomfort to the patient and guides the primary physician in the next steps in patient follow-up.

Cytopathologists are medical doctors who have completed a four-year pathology residency program; many Cytopathologists spend an additional year of training in an approved fellowship program. They are responsible for review and interpretation of cytopathology tests.

Cytopathologists maintains a patient-centered approach by performing Fine Needle Aspirations with on-site adequacy assessment in collaboration with radiologists and primary care physicians.

Cytopathologists examine cells that have been exfoliated (shed), scraped from the body or aspirated with a fine needle. Cell specimens are processed into slides and examined microscopically for the diagnosis of cancer, precancerous conditions, benign tumors and some infectious conditions. The test results are communicated to the primary physician for medical or surgical treatment and follow up for the patients.
Fellowship Training
Upon completion of an accredited cytopathology training program, cytopathologists may pursue board certification and Maintenance of Certification (MOC) by the American Board of Pathology.

Association Contact Information
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