

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

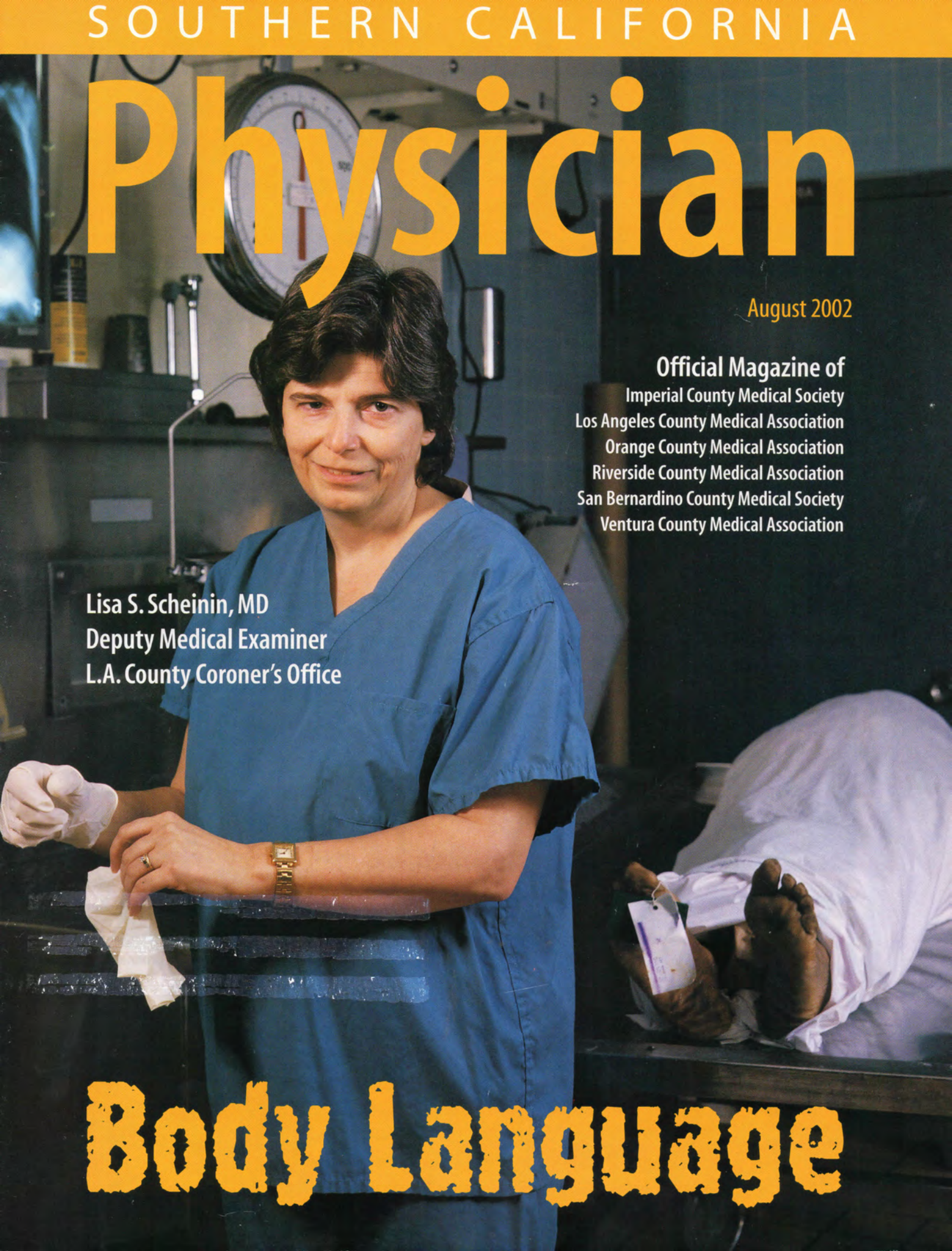
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Lisa S. Scheinin, MD
Deputy Medical Examiner
L.A. County Coroner's Office

Body Language



Death Becomes You

Twelve-year-old Lisa S. Scheinin was an avid collector of *lepidoptera*. She was particularly fascinated with the inner workings of the bright-green luna moth caterpillar, as thick and long as a human finger.

As she prepared to dissect her catch, this self-described “born pathologist” placed the specimen in her mother’s freezer to solidify it and avoid ending up with “green juice.” A few days later, her mother discovered the tiny cadaver and let out a blood-curdling scream.

“I performed my first autopsy on that frozen caterpillar—once my mother stopped yelling at me,” recalls Dr. Scheinin, now a deputy medical examiner with the Los Angeles County Coroner’s Office.

Six years later, she witnessed her first human autopsy. As a candy striper at a Long Island, NY, hospital, she was expected to make deliveries to the pathology lab.

“When you’re a kid, it’s this mysterious place,” she recalls. “You see all these machines and things. I was intrigued.”



comes Her



Dr. Lisa S. Scheinin always knew she'd become a forensic pathologist. By Laurel DiGangi

One day, the pathologist asked if she'd like to watch an autopsy. She never hesitated. On the designated day, she entered the morgue after the first incision had been made.

"I didn't know what to expect," she says. "It was really a shock."

That the decedent was a young woman close to her own age, with similar physical features, added to her astonishment. But she recovered quickly.

"I pulled myself together and started asking questions," she says.

Her composure impressed the pathologist, who invited her to the Suffolk County Medical Examiner's Office to view other autopsies. What she learned during her first day there proved so intriguing that she made a lifetime commitment to forensic pathology.

The bodies of an older couple killed in a traffic accident lay in the autopsy room. The pathologist pointed out the woman's Colles' fractures, explaining how she had anticipated the crash and placed her hands on the dashboard to brace herself.

"I thought this was the most fascinating thing ever—just the way all the pieces fell into place and what you could deduce from them," Dr. Scheinin remembers. "I left that day thinking this is what I want to do."

A Public Service

Dr. Scheinin never wavered from her chosen career path. After completing her undergraduate degree in natural sciences at Johns Hopkins University, she earned a master's degree in pathology from the University of Maryland. In 1986, she received her medical degree from the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

Next came marriage to a computer scientist and a move to Southern California. In 1991, she was offered a fellowship at the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office, where she remains today.

Dr. Scheinin is bothered by a common misconception among the general public—and even the medical community—that forensic pathology is "gruesome and ghoulish," a notion she adamantly

disputes.

"Yes, we're cutting up bodies," she says, "but we're actually performing a service in determining why these people died." Her work is crucial to law enforcement's ability to determine cause of death, and she provides answers when families seek reasons for loved ones' sudden or mysterious deaths.

"I find it easier to dissect a body because you know the person is dead," Dr. Scheinin says. "I can see somebody coming in with hideous injuries, and I'm OK with it. But if I were in an emergency room and a person came in with the same injuries and pain, it would be more emotionally upsetting."

Detective Work

The satisfaction of solving mysteries keeps forensic pathology challenging for Dr. Scheinin.

"I've always liked puzzles," she says. "I do the *New York Times* crossword every Sunday."

Forensic pathology also appeals to her strong visual orientation.

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"Much of pathology is pattern recognition," she says. "There are certain things you need to be able to identify. How can you tell a gunshot entrance wound from an exit wound? How can you determine things like range of fire?"

Her diverse caseload keeps work interesting.

"We deal with all ages, all causes and all manners of death—everything from intrauterine fetal deaths to 90-year-olds who die of atherosclerotic disease."

There are, however, certain joys associated with the practice of medicine that Dr. Scheinin misses.

"Physicians get a rush knowing they've helped a person and that the person is grateful," she says. "We don't get that."

But she will occasionally receive a phone call or letter from a decedent's relative or close friend, thanking her for her role in revealing cause of death.

Autopsy Enlightenment

Working in L.A. County, Dr. Scheinin has conducted her fair share of news-

worthy and celebrity autopsies—the only aspect of her work she finds morbid. She'd rather stress the usefulness of the autopsy to the medical community at large—especially now, when hospitals are performing fewer of them.

"People think that with CT scans and everything else, autopsies aren't as useful a diagnostic tool as they used to be," she says. "They're also not a reimbursable procedure, so hospitals have to eat the expense and a lot don't want to bother."

But there will always be cases in which autopsy findings completely diverge from the initial clinical diagnosis.

"Studies that have looked into the usefulness of autopsies as a procedure have found this time and time again," she says. "It's just as useful and valid a procedure as it ever was."

One recent case involved a man who appeared to have cirrhosis and end-stage liver disease.

"He'd had CT scans of the abdomen, and he had a nodular liver, so they figured it was cirrhosis," Dr. Scheinin says.

But the autopsy revealed a malignant tumor that had metastasized.

"It was all over the place—really extensive," she says. "It was hard for me to believe that a CT scan wouldn't pick this up."

Professional Trade-Offs

Physicians who specialize in forensic pathology seldom enjoy the earning potential of other medical specialists.

"If you look at payment scales, pathologists are on the lower end of the curve," Dr. Scheinin says, "and forensic pathologists are on the lower end of the pathology curve."

Nonetheless, there are advantages. Unlike MDs who jump through managed-care hoops to receive timely and fair compensation, forensic pathologists who work for government entities receive steady paychecks. Dr. Scheinin enjoys all of the benefits of working for Los Angeles County: health insurance, retirement benefits and even paid malpractice coverage. She is never on call (although

continued on page 61



Physicians must be in full compliance with all requirements of the HIPAA Privacy Rule by April 14, 2003. Will you be ready?

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1. Publications bibliography available at our web site

GRAPEVINE *from page 14*

member for the Department of Women's Health and director of colposcopy services at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center, Dr. Cestero was part of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists' delegation to the conference.

"I've been a member of the Spanish Society for a few years," Dr. Cestero says. "I've also collaborated with the group on preparing scientific journals in English. I was deeply honored when I received the award."

Dr. Cestero has practiced medicine for more than 25 years.

Ronald T. Silverstein, MD, of Coast Psychiatric Associates in Long Beach, was named chief of staff at Long Beach Memorial Medical Center.

A Philadelphia native, Dr. Silverstein has been a medical staff member at the hospital since 1976.

"I have a large job cut out for me," Dr. Silverstein says. "One of my roles is to listen to physician concerns, bring people together and promote a consensus. I also

need to present the physician's perspective in a persuasive manner, which is a major challenge."

Dr. Silverstein is a psychiatric consultant to the Department of Rehabilitation's Brain Injury, Spinal Cord Injury and Spinal Pain Programs.

He has served as medical director and consultant to several psychiatric and chemical dependency programs.

A Pomona College graduate, Dr. Silverstein attended medical school at the University of Missouri.

He completed his psychiatric residency at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Torrance.

For the fifth consecutive year, Shell Oil Co. sponsored the 6th Annual Southern California Regional 5K AIDS Walk for Minority Women and Children.

Held at California State University, Dominguez Hills, the event raised funds for the King/Drew Oasis Clinic, an AIDS facility that targets underserved women and children.

"Last year, some 280 Shell volunteers—the largest number from any organiza-

tion—helped raise \$5,000 for the AIDS Walk," says Bob Bruss, manager of community relations for Shell's Southern California Region.

"This year, increased interest in helping the community and building AIDS awareness was so much higher that we anticipated greater volunteer involvement and financial contribution."



"The thing that is most meaningful to me are the testimonials given at the end of the walk by those who are living with AIDS," says Joseph Hoffman, a Shell sales consultant. "It makes all the difference and makes you appreciate life so much. The best part about this walk is seeing all the people with a common interest getting together."

For more information, log onto www.scaidswalk.org. ♦

DEATH BECOMES HER *from page 21*

this isn't the case for pathologists in every Southern California county). She's a "regular" employee, with set hours and a guaranteed salary.

"If you want to have the lifestyle of the rich and famous, you don't get it with pathology," she says, "but it's actually quite a good profession if you want to do something else with your life besides your job."

For Dr. Scheinin, that something else is as diverse as her career. She and her husband, Warren, enjoy fine dining and traveling. For the last eight years, she has studied tae kwon do and recently received her second-degree black belt. An obsessive roller-coaster fan, she's a member of the American Coaster Enthusiasts and has strapped herself into roughly 750 roller coasters on five continents.

"It's a safe thrill—an adrenaline rush, but you know you're totally safe," Dr. Scheinin explains. "It's not like sky-diving, where there's a real possibility of in-

jurying yourself."

She also owns a pet ball python named Hey You and has maintained her childhood passion for butterflies, moths and caterpillars. After a recent trek to the Los Angeles Natural History Museum's Annual Insect Fair, she brought home two caterpillars.

She has studied tae kwon do and recently received her second-degree black belt.

And since Dr. Scheinin has long outgrown her need to autopsy insects, her new treasures won't suffer a frozen fate. They will pupate and eventually emerge as stunning checkerspot butterflies. ♦

Laurel DiGangi is a Burbank freelance writer and regular contributor to Southern California Physician.

POLITICS AS UNUSUAL *from page 40*

ical liability arena, and they've gotten no relief.

"As members of our community, physicians want to live here and work here. But they have wives, children, employees and practices to support. We've reached a critical level where the expense and cost of practicing is beginning to become a liability crisis. It's really beginning to affect their choices and their choosing to stay out of high-risk activities.

"My hope is that the governor's work group, which consists of representatives from the insurance industry, trial lawyers and doctors, comes up with a consensus bill draft that won't be compromised in the legislative process and that doctors will be able to return to work as usual. If they fail, many of them are prepared to leave the state and practice medicine somewhere else." ♦

Dina Burwell is a staff writer for Southern California Physician.

Dear Laurel,

I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed the feature you did on me. And to end up a cover girl - wow! That was totally unexpected. I had thought the article would be filler, but when the issue arrived, I was totally blown away!

I also must apologize for being tardy in getting this note to you. Life has been unbelievably hectic - Albuquerque one week, Chicago the next, etc.

Thank you again for the wonderful job you did. I am thrilled, and so is my family!!

Best regards,

Lisa Scheinin JB