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Tuberculosis First Diagnosed at Autopsy: The Johns Hopkins Hospital Experience

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The varied and nonspecific presentation of tuberculosis, particularly that of disseminated disease, along with difficulties in identification of the tubercle bacilli have made tuberculosis a diagnostic challenge with many cases being first discovered at autopsy. These cases put hospital staff at risk both on the wards and during autopsy. Here we present two recent cases of tuberculosis first diagnosed at autopsy. We then explore all cases of active tuberculosis for which an autopsy was performed at our institution during the last twenty years, focusing particularly on those that were undiagnosed prior to death. We find that despite a decrease in the number of active tuberculosis cases both in the community and at autopsy, the rate of post-mortem diagnosed cases has remained constant. Details from these post-mortem diagnosed cases are used to make suggestions that should prompt increased suspicion among clinicians and autopsy prosectors for tuberculosis and compel them to employ the appropriate treatments and precautions.