

BOOKS

By Tony Russo

“Embalming: History, Theory and Practice” Gets a New Editor

Revisiting the Primary Mortuary Science Text

When Sharon L. Gee-Mascarello applied for the privilege of editing the sixth edition of “Embalming: History, Theory and Practice” she wasn’t 100% sure what she was getting into but was motivated to extend the vision of the book’s original editor, Robert G. Mayer.

“Privilege” was the word she used because every person who becomes an embalmer in America (and many abroad) will refer to this text at the start of their careers. This, after all, is the text from which the questions on the National Board Exam is taken. It’s used in every mortuary science program in the world, according to Gee-Mascarello. Having read it at the start of her own career back in the 1980s, Gee-Mascarello understood the responsibility to the past and future that editing the book brought with it.

“Although it will always be an amazing honor and privilege to follow in Bob Mayer’s footsteps and produce the sixth edition, it was an extremely daunting task, beginning prior to the COVID lockdown and through it, and then after, it spanned two years to produce this textbook,” she said. “I was in contact almost weekly, sometimes daily, with Bob Mayer. He has become a very close friend (he’s always been a colleague), and of course, I am not worthy.”

The American Board of Funeral Service Education, which hires the editor, disagreed. Besides acting as an editorial consultant and contributor for the fourth and fifth editions, Gee-Mascarello is among the most respected authorities on the art and science of embalming. In addition to a 24-year teaching career in the mortuary science program at Wayne

State in Detroit, the semi-retired Gee-Mascarello has spent more than 35 years as an embalmer. She continues to pitch in covering for friends and colleagues occasionally.

A BRIEF HISTORY

The original “Embalming: History, Theory and Practice” textbook was conceived in the early 1980s. The ABFSE and the National Funeral Directors Association decided there should be a new, definitive history and reference work on embalming and began planning to fund one. The NFDA’s Heritage Club put up the seed money and nearly 40 professionals contributed to what would become the first edition. Some of the history writing goes back even further.

“Initial drafts of this uniform curriculum originated as early as the

Second Teachers Institute held in 1947 in Pittsburgh,” Mayer writes in his foreword to the sixth edition. “This latest edition continues to include the histories of embalming and restorative arts written and updated over the years by Edward and Gail Johnson and their daughter Melissa Johnson-Williams.”

Beginning with the third edition, Meyer said the book also included individual sections on mortuary cosmetology and restorative arts. Those sections were dropped from this edition because, he said, they are “best covered in greater depth within available texts related directly to these topics.”

Since it was established, it has become the primary source for all embalming students and a valuable resource for teachers as well.

MEETING AND EXCEEDING STANDARDS

The weight of the task, and the history behind it, was something Gee-Mascarello took seriously. She would be the first person other than Mayer himself to influence the text. The technical practice of embalming, she said, has changed very little since the Civil War. Being the new hand charged with capturing the minute changes and freshening the stories for the first time in a decade enabled Gee-Mascarello to take a step back and evaluate some of the things the book could do.

“I had to stay true to what came before me, knowing full well that if I make too many changes (and the changes can only be made if they need to be made) then I’m certainly changing what the NBE is writing for questions,” she said.

As it turned out, her first roadblock became Gee-Mascarello’s greatest opportunity. One of the requirements from McGraw-Hill, the book’s publisher, was getting photo releases. Each new edition needs new permissions from the families of the deceased depicted within the book’s pages. The fifth edition had more than 300 photographs.

“I thought, no problem. I’ll just go back to Bob Mayer, who keeps amazing records,” Gee-Mascarello said. “I called Bob thinking, this is not an issue at all, and he said, ‘Oh my gosh, we’re going back five editions, and many of these people that were families of these decedents are themselves now deceased.’”

Sixth Edition EMBALMING HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE



THE COVER OF THE SIXTH EDITION OF “EMBALMING HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE” BY SHARON L. GEE-MASCARELLO. (IMAGE COURTESY OF MCGRAW HILL PUBLISHING)

She went back to the publisher, worried that the new edition would be in jeopardy if they couldn’t get the releases. The publisher said it was fine, Gee-Mascarello would just have to find 300 different photos to license and use.

“So, everything changed. That was a pivotal moment. Everything that I had on my agenda to update the sixth edition completely stopped and turned full circle, and my focus was photographs,” she said. “Well, we’re in the middle of a pandemic now. We are not on campus. I am not able to get into the embalming laboratory. So, I relied upon my collection of photographs.”

Gee-Mascarello also was able to secure photos from the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, and was happy to be able to have photos with sustainable licenses in perpetuity.

THE BIG ASK

Having collected the photos, Gee-Mascarello realized she was in a historic position. All the past editions used black and white photos. Using color photos would not only be unprecedented, but it would make the book even more useful to students. Nearly every medical book is in color, but the availability of color photos and cost of color printing had relegated past editions to black and white.

She decided to ask the ABFSE whether it was something they would consider for this new edition. The organization was game and asked Gee-Mascarello to approach the publishers to see whether a five-color print run would drive the price up too much. The difference was negligible, and the first-

ever full color edition of the embalming textbook was approved.

“That’s the biggest change of all, especially when you’re talking about post-mortem discolorations that would be very difficult for a student to conceptualize, and it would certainly be difficult for them to really have an understanding in a black and white photograph,” she said. “So now, if we’re talking about a condition such as jaundice, where the skin of the individual is actually a hue of greens and yellows, when we have a full technicolor photograph, it’s like, ‘Oh, yeah, I know exactly what that is.’”

With the photo hurdle overcome, Gee-Mascarello pitched the idea of a new cover. Again, it would be the first multi-colored edition and have graphics instead of just the title. She approached Tim Lawlis, a friend who had a background in media arts but who never had designed a book cover. Gee-Mascarello said he jumped at the opportunity and began submitting designs based on her suggestions.

“I always focused on the Egyptian god of mummification and embalming, Anubis. Anubis was kind of our mascot,” she said. “And I thought, well, who else would be on a cover about embalming then Anubis? It only took 5,000 plus years for him to make the cover.”

SAME BODY, NEW WORLD

While the technical aspects of embalming may remain the same, Gee-Mascarello added important technological and practical updates for the sixth edition.

“Anatomy has not changed, so we’re still doing things very much the same (as in the Civil War), just improvements in technology, improvements in chemicals, and things of that nature,” she said. “There were a few edits on some of the articles and selected readings, and there were four, I think it’s four, new selected readings. We completely updated and used the ‘2019 Mortuary Care of Armed Forces Service Members’ from the Department of Defense.”

Danielle Wilk, a former student of Gee-Mascarello’s and a mortuary specialist at Dover Air Force Base, provided her with the information, which had changed significantly since the fifth edition.



SHARON L. GEE-MASCARELLO EDITED THE SIXTH EDITION OF “EMBALMING, THEORY AND PRACTICE.” (PHOTO COURTESY OF MCGRAW HILL PUBLISHING)

Other additions included cosmetic airbrushing of unembalmed decedents and the designating restricted cervical injection as a primary injection method.

COVID presented a significant challenge when Gee-Mascarello was working on the book simply because everyone in funeral service was so busy. Getting input and advice from embalmers and even collaborators was a slow process. If there was any upside at all, it was that she was able to include COVID information in the book.

An article titled, “COVID-19 Infection Control and Storage,” likely will continue through to future editions with modifications as they’re discovered. COVID went into the glossary, as well.

“Also, we did an introduction of deaths from opioid use,” she said. “And we did an expanded instrument section with photos and descriptions for the instruments.”

After nearly a quarter-century teaching mortuary students, Gee-Mascarello also had plenty of insight into how to make some of the more important concepts stickier. She expanded the “Concepts for Study” section at the end of each chapter

to include questions for students to answer on their own and vocabulary words they should commit to memory.

“This is in preparation for not only exams in their college and their discipline, but also for the National Board Examination licensure. One particular chapter, Chapter 18, the Preparation of Organ and Tissue Donors, was the only chapter in the textbook that was completely rewritten” Gee-Mascarello said. “That was my pet project.”

As a proponent of organ and tissue donation, she felt the chapter needed “a little bit more positive neutrality to it.”

Gee-Mascarello also finessed the language to better suit a teacher’s aims by replacing all instances of “problem” with the word “challenge.” She worried that as students were learning how fraught with problems the process could be, they might develop the wrong mindset. A problem is pejorative, something that causes people to fail. A challenge, however, is something you rise to.

“If you tell them that it’s a challenge, everything is a challenge,” she said. •