



# As Seen on TV: Dr. G: Medical Examiner Shows Reality of Forensic Pathology

by Terri Yablonsky Stat, MA

**J**an Garavaglia, MD, unravels the mysteries of life and death each day, helping investigators and families alike answer questions about unexpected or suspicious deaths.

As chief medical examiner for Florida's District Nine in Orlando and inspiration for the Discovery Health Channel's hit series *Dr. G: Medical Examiner*, Garavaglia is shedding new light on forensic pathology. Each episode features at least three unexplained cases Garavaglia has handled. Viewers get a firsthand look, through re-enactments, at sudden and unexpected deaths and the cutting-edge forensic science techniques she uses to determine

cause and manner of death.

Early on, Garavaglia planned to enter internal medicine, with psychiatry holding special interest. All that changed when she heard lectures by George E. Gantner, Jr., MD, Professor of Pathology and Director of the Division of Forensic and Environmental Pathology at St. Louis University School of Medicine. "What he did was absolutely fascinating," she said. "He dealt with police and courts and medicine and combined all those realms to put the pieces together to solve the puzzle."

Forensic pathology had captured her interest. "I became disillusioned with internal medicine because there wasn't enough problem-solving," she said.

"I seriously considered forensics





but thought I'd be giving up my medical education and just having fun. Soon I realized forensic pathology brings together everything I want. It helps society and families, and it even involves abnormal behavior." She had found her niche.

Garavaglia received her medical degree from St. Louis University School of Medicine and completed an internship

in internal medicine and residency in anatomic/clinical pathology at St. Louis University Hospitals. She also completed a fellowship in forensic pathology at the Dade County Medical Examiner's Office in Miami. She is board-certified in combined anatomic and clinical pathology and forensic pathology.

Since Garavaglia graduated from medical school in 1982, there's been an upturn in forensic pathology. "Nobody knew about it back in the early 1980s," she says. Best-selling writer Patricia Cornwell fueled interest with her popular series of crime novels featuring female pathologist Dr. Kay Scarpetta.

"When my advisors found out I was leaving internal medicine to go into forensic pathology, they thought I'd lost my mind," Garavaglia says. "Even my mom questioned what I was doing. There's nothing greater than finding things you're good at and that you like."

She's been working for District Nine in Orlando since 2003. Her office, which includes four doctors, performs 1,150 autopsies per year on anyone who dies suddenly or accidentally or under suspicious circumstances or trauma. She works with detectives, attorneys, crime scene investigators, and physicians.

Garavaglia's career took an interesting twist when the publisher of *Redbook* magazine decided to do an article about a female medical examiner similar to Dr. Kay Scarpetta but more like its reader demographics. *Redbook* found Garavaglia through the National Association of Medical Examiners.

"When they called, I picked up the phone and thought I was answering general questions about forensic pathology," she said. "The next thing I knew a woman followed me for three days." The article appeared in *Redbook* in 1997.

Several years later, the Discovery Health Channel decided to do a pilot about a female "Quincy-type" and found the *Redbook* article. Garavaglia was invited to do the pilot for *Dr. G: Medical Examiner*. The pilot was a hit, and the series debuted in 2004.

The show is ranked No. 1 for Discovery Health and is broadcast in Europe and South Africa. Garavaglia, or Dr. G, has appeared on *Larry King Live* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

"I can't believe I'm explaining necrotic bowel on national television and it's a hit," chuckled Garavaglia. "What's fascinating is the story behind it."

Juggling a job as chief medical examiner and starring in a hit television

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— Jan Garavaglia, MD



show keep Garavaglia busy. She's in the office every day and works every fourth weekend. The 51-year-old divorced mother of two, ages 13 and 18, tapes her show Wednesday nights after work.

"I help choose the cases, read the scripts to make sure the science is right, and do the interviews that set up what's going on," she said. "I have a lot of input. I don't have a script. I just talk. They make the script around what I say."

Working in a morgue is a far cry from being in the spotlight of a television camera. "I ignore cameras," Garavaglia said. "I go about my business and talk to my producer as if the camera is not there. It's all ad-libbed, so you need to be certain you get it right."

Garavaglia believes people learn a valuable lesson when they see someone die unexpectedly. "Some people don't understand the severity of common conditions," she said. "My secretary saw the episode depicting a man with high blood pressure collapsing while carrying groceries upstairs. She never had her blood pressure checked. We talked about how hypertension is a silent killer. It hits home when you see it enacted."

For Garavaglia, a book is in the works about health and common-sense ways to avoid premature death. The book will be a continuation of the show.

She advises those who are thinking about a career to ask themselves, What is it that really lights my fire? What kind of thinking do I enjoy? "Take a chance and see if you can incorporate these things into a career," she said. "Forensic pathology is not the best paid specialty because you're employed by the county, but it's a lot more fun for me and that's worth it."

Dr. G: Medical Examiner can be seen Friday nights on the Discovery Health Network, 9 p.m. EST.

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