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Why Pathology should not merge with Radiology

Recent discussions about merging radiology with pathology prompt a reply. My inclination is to be very skeptical of any talk merger of these disciplines.

Here's why. First, the natural evolution of academic disciplines is toward specialization and fragmentation. Often, the fragments become independent disciplines in their own right. Within pathology itself, witness the emergence of new fields like molecular pathology, now officially blessed with a sub-specialty board exam. Not that long ago, molecular pathology was an offshoot of hematopathology, or microbiology, or clinical chemistry. Now it's a fully fledged field. Merging academic disciplines is swimming against the current of historical precedents.

And consider that mergers between even anatomic and clinical pathology in academic departments are generally marriages of administrative convenience rather than a true merger. Every major academic center I know of has separate directors of AP and CP. Few people can bridge the gap between AP and CP, at least with the levels of expertise required in academia and larger labs.

Radiologists look at big stuff. Pathologists look at really small stuff. If it takes years of training to become proficient in either one, how might a would-be pathoradiologist, (or a radiopathologist) hope to bridge the gap in a residency program of reasonable duration?

I agree that radiology may utilize new imaging technologies that go beyond the traditional twilight world of gray tones and provide specific diagnoses using immunologic or other markers. But that is not unprecedented. What impact, if any, that has on surgical pathology remains to be seen. The fact that radiologists have for decades been able to image thyroid tissue, including metastatic thyroid tissue, has not rendered thyroid surgical pathology any less important.

Finally, what of clinical pathology? I've already alluded to the lack of a true merger between AP and CP, two fields that both have the word pathology in their title. Maybe one day we'll have Dr. McCoy's medical device that magically reads every detail of anatomy and biochemistry as it's moved over a patient. But for now, count me among the skeptics.