

DR PORNTIP ROJANASUNAN NO BONES UNTURNED

Dr Porntip Rojanasunan is Thailand's most famous forensic scientist. Nicknamed 'Dr Death' by the mass media, her findings often contradicted those of the Thai police, leading to numerous clashes between the two. She gained international attention for her work on identifying victims of the December 2004 tsunami and has since raised public awareness of forensic science work in Thailand.

In her second book, *No Bones Unturned*, Dr Porntip delves into some of her most well-known cases, including the grisly murder of medical student Jenjira Ploy-angunsri, the mysterious disappearance of Thai-Muslim human rights activist Khun Somchai Neelapaijit, and the death of Malaysian political aide Teoh Beng Hock. She also discusses the role of forensic science in stabilising the violent insurgency in southern Thailand and reflects on the milestones in her life. Brutally honest, Dr Porntip never flinches from the gruesome possibilities as she unearths the truth despite obstacles at every turn.



In her first book, *The Dead Do Talk*, Dr Porntip recounts her growing-up years and the influences that shaped her life, and describes the challenges of her pioneering role in developing the role of forensic science in Thailand.

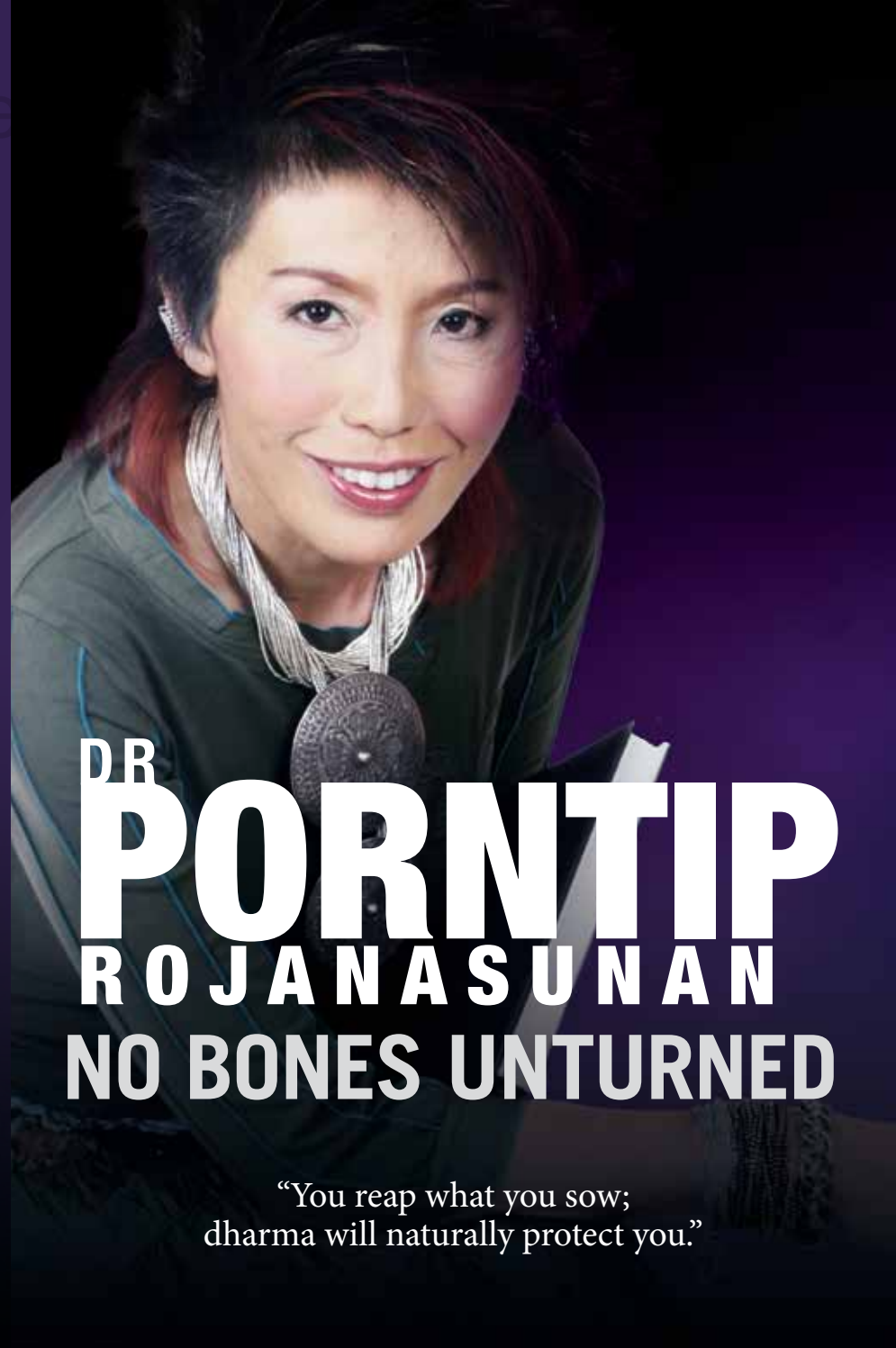
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“You reap what you sow;
dharma will naturally protect you.”

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*To
my husband Wichai and my daughter Ten,
the two most important people in my life.
You are always standing by me behind the scenes
and supporting me in my pursuit of justice.*

*And also to my parents,
for planting the seeds of determination in me
along with the desire to do good deeds
according to Buddhist teachings.*

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This is my second book in English. I have had the opportunity to face various challenging and interesting situations in my life, which gave me the inspiration to record them down here. Reflecting on my experiences, I have described the direction of my analysis in examining evidence and my methods of using forensic science to reveal the wrongdoings of murderers. I also write of my onerous responsibility in uncovering the truth, and how I overcame or handled numerous problems and obstacles.

In 2009, I was asked to help out with the death of a political aide in Malaysia (this case is covered in Chapter 5). The case was an important turning point in my life. Because of my involvement, I became enmeshed in the political conflicts within both Malaysia and Thailand, and there were signals that the Malaysian government was unhappy with my actions and conclusions.

Four years later, in 2013, I was removed from my role as director of the Central Institute of Forensic Science (CIFS) in Thailand and appointed to an inactive post as the inspector-general of the Ministry of Justice. Yingluck Shinawatra was the prime minister at that time, after succeeding Abhisit Vejjajiva in August 2011. I felt that this was a political

strategy to slow down the development of forensic work in the country's justice process, as the position of inspector-general in government service is equivalent to 'being put into storage'.

However, in the end, everything seemed to go according to the Buddhist dharmic doctrine: "You reap what you sow; dharma will protect those who protect it." In May 2014, I was reinstated as director of the CIFS. I had about a year left as a government officer, before my retirement in 2015, to propel the development of forensic work as much as possible.

For a long time, Thailand did not have a proper system to locate missing persons. The country's centralised police force has a wide range of responsibilities, from handling cases of petty theft to drugs and murder investigations. As a result, many policemen view missing persons as a low priority among their many case files. Under Thai regulations, there is no specified waiting period before a person should be reported missing, but police typically wait for 24 hours before accepting a missing person report from family members or friends. It is not uncommon for a missing person case to remain unsolved for years.

However, this is slowly changing. The government has announced that the Prime Minister's Office will follow up on investigating missing persons and identifying anonymous corpses. In 2011, the Royal Thai Police set up the Missing

Persons Management Centre (MPMC). As the name suggests, the centre aims to be a focal point for sharing information about missing people in Thailand, and also to collaborate with other authorities on investigating missing persons cases. From then on, anonymous corpses were examined according to international standards and not disposed of via cremation.

In 2015, for the first time in more than a decade, the Ministry of Justice received the authority to propose policies to integrate departments and set up a working system to follow up on missing persons cases, including identifying anonymous corpses. In Thailand's tumultuous and troubled southern border provinces, I helped to set up a DNA database system to help solve crimes and track down suspects.

The various accounts in this book are significant in the development of the justice system and of forensic science work in Thailand. They are also important on a personal level, as I reflect on doing good deeds despite having to walk forward alone and wearily. In the end, I hope to advance towards my goal by accumulating merit in my life. This is because I hold fast to the Buddhist path; problems and obstacles are practice in accumulating goodness in the journey towards nirvana.

Porntip Rojanasunan
August 2015, Bangkok

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CHAPTER 1

JENJIRA'S CASE

Left: Jenjira's boyfriend, Serm Sakhonrat, was found guilty of murder due to DNA evidence, the first such case in Thailand.

Below: Searching for evidence during the investigation.

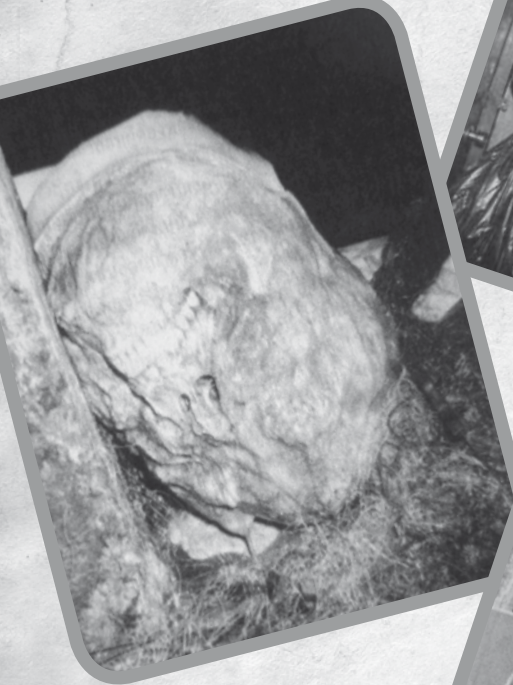
The case which threw me into the limelight and turned me from a normal forensic doctor into a 'celebrity' and a detective was the murder of Jenjira Ploy-angunsri in 1998. Jenjira was a medical student from the Faculty of Medicine at Ramathibodi Hospital, where I was working at that time. In a murder that shocked the nation, she was killed and dismembered by her boyfriend, a 23-year-old medical student from Vajira Hospital.

Apart from making me a 'celebrity', this case also marked the start of the police's disdain towards me, due to the many clashes I had with them over numerous issues.

I had two roles at the hospital that brought about a turning point in the case.

The first was, as a forensic doctor, my job was to verify and establish the cause of death. When the murder was discovered, I was teaching forensic pathology and was the Head of the Autopsy and Forensic departments under the Faculty of Medicine, Ramathibodi Hospital, Mahidol University, which was my alma mater.

The second was being a 'chaplain' of sorts—a lecturer on



Above and right: Two unidentified skulls were found, one of which was later confirmed to be Jenjira's.

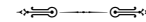
stand-by to counsel and look after medical students who were having problems that affected their studies and grades. I was assigned by the Faculty of Medicine to look after the Year 1 to Year 3 medical students, who were usually between 20 and 22 years old. As a result of this duty, I grew familiar with the trials and tribulations faced by the medical students.

It was mostly the male students who visited me to chat or look for advice. The female students tend to be better at handling their problems. The common issues that the students faced were matters of the heart; difficulties at home, such as parents falling ill; and poor living conditions. Some students also struggled with the fact that they were studying medicine because it was what their parents wanted rather than their own desires. A few simply did not like to study and thus did badly in their examinations.

For some students, I did not know what they were stressed over, but their school records perpetually showed a slide in their grades. I was assigned to speak to them to get to the root of their problem, before reporting to the faculty for help. The faculty's Department of Education, which was responsible for learning and pedagogy, would arrange for the students to come and have an initial conversation with me, largely because my office was on the lowest floor and easy to find. In addition, I often started work early—I usually reached my office at 5 am. It was therefore convenient for the students

to look for me. My role was mostly to listen to the students' problems and see what I can do to help them find a solution. Sometimes, I would help tutor them in difficult subjects, such as pathology, to help them pass the examinations.

The case of Jenjira was a factor leading to the establishment of the Missing Persons Identification Centre under the Ministry of Justice five years after the case occurred. Writing about Jenjira's case now serves as a reminder to the parties involved—her parents, teachers, friends, and the police—of the social, educational, or political problems that remain in the country. There are many more victims who do not have the chance to demand justice due to a lack of attention to the development of forensic work.



Around the end of January 1998, I was informed by the Department of Education of the Faculty of Medicine that a female student in Year 5 had gone missing. By the time I got to know about this, Jenjira had been missing for two or three days already.

At that time, she was about to be rotated from the Department of Orthopaedics to the Department of Ophthalmology, which would have been the last rotation in her fifth year of study. On 26 January, the day of Jenjira's

disappearance, a professor had arranged to meet the medical students rotated to the Department of Ophthalmology at about 7 pm. Jenjira had told a friend that she was going to settle some matters outside of the school campus and would return to join the class in the evening at the appointed time. However, it appeared that Jenjira never returned and had been missing from that point onwards.

Whenever students disappear or have any sort of problems, their professors would notify the Department of Education. As mentioned earlier, I was in a position where I was assigned to look after students and counsel them whenever they had problems; thus I was notified of Jenjira's disappearance.

On the day I learnt of the disappearance, I tried hard to find out more about Jenjira because I could not recall what she looked like. I found out that Jenjira was a good student with a high grade point average (GPA), which was considered extremely good among the medical students.

At that time there was no computer system or online database in which I could search for information on the students. I had to go through physical copies of the student records. The only photograph of Jenjira in her file was taken in her first year—which meant she would likely look different four years later.

What I knew for sure—from my experience in looking after the students—was that female students would not

abandon their studies as easily as male students. Even if the girls were stressed out, they would still bear with it. They were more responsible towards their duties, unlike the male students, who appeared to be strong but were actually more fragile, having a temper more rash and violent than the girls.

When I analysed the preliminary information I had of Jenjira, I found that she definitely did not have any problems with her studies. Thus, it made me wonder what it could be that caused such a good student to disappear.

After a week had passed with no news or progress in her case at all, I spoke to her group of friends. I sensed that all her friends seemed not to feel much about her disappearance because they were heavily burdened by their studies.

Such apathy came about because of the large number of students in the school and the syllabus, which was so heavy that it did not allow time for each student to build deep bonds with their friends, or learn more about their friends' problems. During that time, there were about 150 students in each yearly cohort. The superficial relationships among the students and the weight of their studies meant that those who needed help were neglected. As for Jenjira, it seemed that she probably had a deep loneliness within her and she sought warmth from her family. But her mother was living in another country and Jenjira had never met her father. Her grandmother had been her guardian and caretaker ever since

Jenjira was a young girl. Thus, I believe that she consequently found a 'father figure' in her boyfriend, who she felt would fill the void in her life.



Let me take a moment to reflect on such children in today's society. They may be good children: they are good at their studies, they are obedient and they follow instructions. However, if they lack genuine warmth from their family, or if their parents are not happily together, these children will look for affection elsewhere. This may not even be a conscious action or behaviour. However, it is easy for them to fall into the hands of someone who does not have good intentions towards them. They are unable to see the true colours of the people around them, even though they may be good at their studies. It is such a pity that these children excel academically but do not have the 'street-smart' attitude to survive in the outside world.

It appeared that Jenjira had been enticed to believe in a doctrine that taught that it is not a sin to kill a person if it is the will of God. Going down this path often leads to opportunities to meet people with evil intentions. This is one of the insights that I am trying hard to put across to help others—parents, teachers and friends—be more attentive

towards the people around us, because it is easy for someone who is lonely or weary to stumble onto the wrong path or fall into the wrong hands.

After Jenjira's mother learnt that her daughter was missing, she rushed back to Thailand to keep tabs on the matter. Two weeks after the disappearance, I began to believe that Jenjira must have met with danger—and could have even lost her life. But I did not want to antagonise others with this idea, so all I did was wait and keep myself updated on the progress of the case. I learnt that the police had taken one of her male friends, Serm Sakhonrat, in for interrogation. Serm was one of the most likely suspects, as the police had found bloodstains in the boot of his car.

When I heard about the bloodstains, I felt hopeful because if we ran DNA tests we could find out whether the blood belonged to Jenjira or not. With the support of a professor who was an expert in DNA, the pathology department of the forensic unit had brought in DNA testing technology to conduct paternity tests. The department had obtained an automated machine for DNA testing—the first of its kind in Thailand. The bloodstains in the car were therefore very important evidence. If they were indeed Jenjira's, the police would have to arrest Serm, because something must have happened for bloodstains to be found in the car.

Regrettably, at that time, knowledge of DNA testing

was still not widespread in Thailand. This was coupled with the fact that it was the duty of the forensic police to gather evidence. I did not know if I could help, but decided to ask the police to send the bloodstain samples over for testing. The police replied: “Never mind, it’s not necessary, because Serm told us that the blood is from minced fish, and he was helping his mother deliver minced fish to customers.”

How likely was it that one would use one’s car to transport things that may stain the interior? And who would sell fresh minced fish? It is more likely for people to sell dried minced fish. Any pathologist would understand the significance of the bloodstains, because working in this field I knew with all my heart that this was a clear piece of evidence. But the system did not leave room for any discussion at all (and remains so to this day).

This piece of evidence was very important, because if it proved the truth without having to employ any confession, the court could sentence the maximum penalty to those found guilty. However, should there be a confession from the accused, this is seen as his willingness to help contribute to the progress of the investigation and the court would likely give the accused a reduced sentence for this ‘good behaviour’.

The case continually made the front pages of the newspapers and gripped the nation. Soon it was reported that Serm had confessed to strangulating Jenjira to death

with his own hands, because she had wanted to break up with him. After that, he dismembered her body and threw her organs and flesh into a toilet bowl in Hotel 99, where he had booked a room. As he dumped her remains into the bowl, the pipe became clogged. He then used Drano (a drain cleaner) to unclog it. As for her bones, he put them in a bag and threw them into the water from the bridge overlooking Bang Pakong River, near Motorway Road.

I read about his confession in the newspapers and could not believe that it was true, because dismembering a corpse was not easy to carry out within the confines of a hotel toilet. Another important reason why I did not believe it was that dismembering a fresh corpse would result in blood splattering. It would be difficult to wash all the blood away. Most important of all, the unpleasant smell of the blood would definitely have left a stench in the room. However, it seemed that neither the owner of the hotel nor the guests who stayed in that room afterwards saw any bloodstains or smelled anything unusual at all.

I thought hard about a possible hiding place for the corpse, and what came to mind was the tank for preserving cadavers at the Faculty of Science. At that time, Serm was studying Anatomy. I decided to investigate. However, when I opened the preservation tank, I felt sure that it was not the right place upon seeing the state of the tank, which had large iron rods on

top in order to submerge a cadaver in preservation chemicals. The iron rods would pose a barrier to hiding the corpse there.

Serm confessed on a Thursday afternoon. As I began work on Friday, I received a call from the police commander of the Scientific Crime Detection Division. He said that two unidentified skulls had been found earlier in Bang Pakong River, near Motorway Road, during January to March, which happened to be the period in which Jenjira disappeared. He wanted me to help take a look at them in case there were any clues and to help conduct DNA tests too. Meanwhile, he was going with Jenjira's parents to search for fragments of her skull around the Motorway bridge following Serm's confession that he had taken Jenjira's remains and thrown it into the Bang Pakong River.



During that time, Ramathibodi Hospital and the Institute of Forensic Medicine (IFM) worked together. The IFM was formerly The Forensic Unit in the Police Hospital and helped out in all forensic matters, such as investigating woundings and killings. I helped to carry out duties of a pathologist, such as looking at samples taken from corpses. Occasionally, I sent my students to observe the work done at the IFM.

The same day that Serm confessed was the day that Jenjira's

peers started work as extern doctors (that is, doctors who are not part of the regular staff) — it was the first day of their final year. It so happened that I was teaching the Year 5 medical students about forensic methods. After class, I told them about the two unidentified skulls which had been found, and requested for close friends of Jenjira to accompany me in examining them at the IFM. I wanted the students to be my 'second pair of eyes'.

If I wonder what inspired me to think of that, I'd have to admit that I naturally have a strong curiosity of wanting to solve the question, who did it? When I see an unsolved mystery, I will think, what does it seem to be about? Where did it occur? How did it happen? Various questions arise quickly in my search for answers. From the deep recesses of my mind, various connections would be made, ranging from what I picked up while watching documentaries, to what I had learn from my experiences working on various cases.

Two girls who said they were close to Jenjira volunteered to take a look at the skulls. When we arrived at the IFM, a pathologist brought us to examine the skulls. The first skull, which had been cleaned, was in perfect condition, as it had a complete set of molars and jaw. This skull was found at the end of January, three days after Jenjira disappeared. A pathologist had examined the skull and concluded that it belonged to a male. This skull had traces of bullet piercings through the

temple. The second skull was found at the end of February. No parts of the molar or jaw remained, and it had not been cleaned yet. The flesh had been boiled off and there were still rotting bloodstains on the skull. The pathologist's preliminary conclusion was that the skull belonged to a female.

Jenjira's two friends looked at the first skull and said, "The first tooth of the skull looks like Pui's (Jenjira's nickname), because Pui has a greyish-yellow tooth, due to her taking too much Tetracycline [a type of antibiotic] when she was a child." But when the IFM pathologist said that this skull was that of a male, everyone accepted it and did not consider that it could be Jenjira's, despite her friends' comment.

Truthfully, at that time, Thailand did not have any forensic expert who was skilled at examining skulls. It was probably the professors in Anatomy who taught at the various medical faculties who had the most knowledge. So after this case was closed, I decided to go to America to study a short course in Forensic Anthropology in order to gain more knowledge about bones and skulls. I also started to think that Thailand should have a centre to investigate missing persons in order to gather unidentified bodies and work proactively—to investigate and seek the truth behind these deaths, which are often the result of undetected murders.

That day, I documented the bloodstains on the second skull which had been identified as that of a female in order

to check its DNA. I did not have any samples of Jenjira's DNA as a point of comparison, as she did not have any blood drawn before she went missing. Therefore the only way was to compare it with the DNA of her parents. This is because the DNA in every human comes from the mother and the father: 50 per cent from each parent.

So, I called the police commander and told him: "When you are done searching for the skeletal remains in Bang Pakong River, please bring her parents down to Ramathibodi Hospital to have their blood samples taken."

At about 8 pm, a forensic policeman brought Jenjira's parents to the IFM to have their blood samples drawn. When that was done, the police gave me a large rectangular plastic sheet which had a bloodstain on it for me to carry out tests. This plastic sheet was another important piece of evidence that came to light during Serm's interrogation. It had been found in the boot of Jenjira's car which Serm said he had abandoned in Muang Thong Thani, a large housing estate located in Nonthaburi Province. After killing Jenjira, Serm said, he had left the car unlocked with the key still in the ignition, hoping that someone would steal the car so that it could not be found. Unbelievably, even though more than a month had passed, no one had stolen the vehicle, and this became an important piece of evidence.

I was confident that Jenjira's spirit was growing stronger.

I believe that her spirit was guiding the direction of the investigation.

All the evidence was sent to Ajarn Budsaba Rerkamnuaychoke, an expert in DNA testing at the pathology department, and his team for tests. The results were released on Saturday afternoon: The bloodstain on the second skull was definitely that of a male. This meant that we had to continue searching for Jenjira's skull.

This was the first case to demonstrate what DNA testing technology could achieve, using the first automated machine in Thailand to test and search for DNA fingerprints, combined with the skills of the DNA testing team.



Meanwhile, the bloodstained plastic sheet from Jenjira's car yielded results that showed the blood came from a female. Sure enough, it had a 50 per cent match each with the blood samples from Jenjira's parents. This was the first piece of important evidence which could persuade the authorities to investigate further. It also meant that Jenjira had definitely been physically harmed. Otherwise, her blood would not have stained this sheet of plastic.

After the blood test results was made known to the police commander of the Scientific Crime Detection Division, he

asked me to accompany the police on their visit to Hotel 99 the following Monday. The police planned to check the hotel's septic tank to see if there were pieces of human flesh there, after Serm confessed to slicing up the flesh and throwing the pieces down the toilet.

The police commander joked to me: "You and the undertaker are probably the only ones who would be able to identify pieces of human flesh."

The truth was, I did not think we would find any pieces of human flesh in the septic tank of the hotel, because I did not believe in Serm's confession. The police commander revealed to me that he agreed with me, but his superior had ordered him to check the tank, and so he had to follow orders.

Thus, on 10 March, I worked outside the hospital for the first time as a forensic scientist in Bangkok. In spite of having often worked in such a capacity when I was in Phitsanulok Province, this task was completely outside of my job scope at that point in time. I asked to be present only when they were pouring out the sewage, as I did not want to wait for the men to unclog the toilet. I also wanted to avoid the press that would most likely be waiting outside the hotel. Therefore, the police brought me to the sewage factory of Bangkok located around On Nut, Phra Khanong. Here, the unclogged and sucked-out sewage would be poured out and rinsed with water to check if there were pieces of human flesh in them.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Khunying Porntip Rojanasunan was the Director (2008–2013, 2014–2015) of Thailand’s Central Institute of Forensic Science (CIFS), which she co-founded in 2002. The CIFS is an independent laboratory under the Ministry of Justice. She was a government officer for 35 years until her retirement in September 2015.

Born in 1954, Dr Porntip was conferred the honorific title of *Khunying* by the King of Thailand in 2003. She has received numerous awards and accolades for her contributions to Thai civil life.

- In 1998, she was awarded Outstanding Medical Lecturer in Promoting Ethics in Medical Undergraduate Students by the Medical Council of Thailand.
- In 2001, she received the Outstanding Alumni Award from the Faculty of Science at Mahidol University.
- In 2007, she received the Outstanding Female Promoter of Human Rights Award from the Office of Women’s Affairs and Family Development, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.

- In 2010, she was voted most trustworthy person in Thailand in the *Reader’s Digest* Trust Survey 2010.
- In 2012, she received the Honorary Award for “Persons Dedicated to Human Rights” from the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, in honour of Human Rights Day.
- In 2013, she received the Outstanding Individual Award for “Valuable Individual of the Year 2013 in Public Health” from the Foundation of Science and Technology Council of Thailand.
- In 2015, she received the Outstanding Thai Woman award from the National Council of Women of Thailand and was named as an exemplary individual of the year by the Thai Foundation.

Dr Porntip is also the author of *The Dead Do Talk* (2012). In her first book, she recounts her growing-up years and the influences that shaped her life, and describes the challenges of her pioneering role in developing the role of forensic science in Thailand.