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CLBB News

A newsletter from the Center for Law, Brain & Behavior

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"Where Law and Medicine Meet"

CLBB Co-Founder and Co-Director Dr. Judith Edersheim on Bringing Neuroscience to the Courtroom

Dr. Judith Edersheim spoke with Harvard Medicine, the magazine of Harvard Medical School, about how she is bridging the gap between law and medicine as co-founder and co-director of the Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital Center for Law, Brain & Behavior.

Read the full article [here](#).



"I have a dream job. Every day is more exciting than the last," Judith Edersheim exclaims with palpable enthusiasm for her work as director of the Massachusetts General Hospital Center for Law, Brain & Behavior. The center requires Edersheim to draw daily from her Harvard degrees in medicine and law as she strives to bring sound science into the courtroom.

Edersheim notes that when she began her career, her path “was not very usual, nor was it particularly planned.” While her law school experience was “fascinating and mind-blowing,” as Edersheim began working in corporate and real estate law, she realized that something was missing. “The work didn’t have enough stories. It didn’t have enough immediacy and intimacy. It didn’t solve personal problems,” she recalls.

So Edersheim pivoted to a field with plenty of problems to solve: medicine.

She began her psychiatry residency certain that law was “in the rearview mirror.” But then a colleague asked her to look at a legal case involving medicine. The result was eye-opening and led her to complete a fellowship in forensic psychiatry, ultimately placing her squarely on a path that led to her co-founding the center 15 years ago. The goal: bridge the divide between medicine and law and champion great science in the service of justice. The center began by responding to incorrect neuroscience in legal settings but now actively promotes accurate neuroscience. It does this in four main areas: the aging brain, sentencing reform, juvenile and emerging adult justice, and trauma and the law.

In practice, this involves teaching lawyers, judges, and others in the legal system about the science of mental illness, substance use disorders, memory, trauma, and developing and aging brains. In addition, Edersheim and her colleagues offer judges scientific expertise by filing amicus, or friend-of-the-court, briefs on brain-related topics in landmark legal cases. They’ve written briefs explaining why the science of memory makes single-eyewitness identification inaccurate, how the brains of adolescents and emerging adults differ from the adult brain, how the isolation of solitary confinement has lasting neurologic effects, and how trauma affects the brain in people seeking asylum.

“If we’re looking for justice, the law is about mental states, and mental states start with the brain,” Edersheim says.

Now, the team is working to expand the center’s influence to reach legal systems throughout the world by working with the United Nations to develop an international law and neuroscience executive diploma. It is also creating a digital database of amicus and legislative briefs, case law, and video tutorials about neuroscience.

Yet even as her ambitions for the center grow, Edersheim remains focused on the little things.

“It’s knowing that we changed a life. That we managed to help an innocent person be released, prevented someone from losing a nest egg, or gave the justice system the science to believe in the redemption of a young person. Those victories keep me going.”

Catherine Caruso is a science writer in the HMS Office of Communications and External Relations.

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