The history of pathology in Lebanon is directly linked to that of the country in the mid- to late nineteenth century and the establishment of new colleges and medical schools in it. Because of its geographic location along the east Mediterranean coast and the mixed religious composition of its population within the vast Ottoman Empire, Lebanon was an attractive site for the work of foreign missionaries beginning in the 18th century and who were instrumental in founding many schools and colleges in different parts of the country. Of note in this regard are the founding by American missionaries of the Syrian Protestant College (SPC) in 1866 and its Medical Department in 1867 and the founding by French Jesuits of St. Joseph University in 1875 and its Faculty of Medicine in 1883. In 1920, SPC was renamed the American University of Beirut (AUB).

From the early days of the Medical Department at SPC, teaching of pathology was recognized as an essential part of the four year medical curriculum. The original instruction was in Arabic but was shifted to English in 1883. The three founding faculty members included Dr. Cornelius Van Dyck, Professor of Pathology and Medicine, who wrote a 778 page landmark book in Arabic entitled “Basic Principles of Internal Pathology i.e. Theoretical and Practical Principles of Human Medicine”. Its title reflects the thinking of the day, which still holds until today, in that learning pathology is essential for the good understanding of the basis of disease and allowing the best practice of medicine. The book is divided into three parts: Part I covers general pathology principles, part II covers classification of diseases, and Part III covers specific medical diseases. In the latter part, there is inclusion of the definition of individual diseases, their clinical signs and symptoms and where applicable, there is pathology description based on autopsy or tissue examination. This sequence of pathology teaching i.e. general pathology followed by systemic pathology and in full coordination with clinical medicine has been adhered to throughout these years and until the present day. Establishing a museum of pathology specimens was an early effort in the history of SPC since 1873. In the early days, pathology teaching and service were predominantly covered by faculty members who traveled from USA and Europe but in the early 20th century and on, the locals, now graduates of the College and later the University, started joining the ranks of the faculty and assuming similar responsibilities. The best example is that of Dr. Philip Sahyoun who joined the Department in 1923 and became chair from 1945-1969. The several wars of the 20th century took their heavy toll on the department and the number of faculty members fluctuated over the years and at many intervals, the sharp shortage was supported by visiting professors from abroad. However, AUB remained committed to academic pathology and had a free standing pathology building to support the departmental needs from 1925 until 1970. In 1970, a new medical center was built and it became the new home for pathology until the present day. Despite all strenuous conditions, the Department never had a disruption in its academic and clinical services and for a long period between the 1940’s and 1960’s, it was a major referral laboratory for diagnostic work from many neighboring countries and institutions because they lacked such services at home. Undergraduate education and postgraduate training were sustained and the pathology museum was enriched in 1970 by a collection of 450 gross
pathology specimens obtained from the Institute of Pathology of Freiberg in Germany by Dr. Harald Noltenius. Today the medical curriculum is undergoing major revision that incorporates pathology; in addition to the drop in didactic teaching, there will be a shift from the traditional microscopy to virtual microscopy where a slide bank and images will be created to meet the evolving educational needs and making use of the rapidly improving teaching tools.

From the 1920’s until the late 1960’s, one highlight of the pathology department teaching and weekly educational activities was a weekly Clinicopathologic Conference (CPC). Attendance of the CPC was a requirement for medical students in their third, fourth and fifth years. It was mostly held on Saturdays at noon and it attracted a large number of medical staff, residents and medical students. On few occasions, visiting professors were asked to take part in these weekly educational exercises. Regular weekly clinicopathologic and multidisciplinary conferences, including tumor board meetings, have been also a tradition at the hospital since the 40’s.

The residency training program in anatomic pathology is the oldest in the region and it had its impact on Lebanon and the neighboring countries; over decades, scores of medical graduates, coming from several countries of the region, did their training in the department but the majority sought additional training abroad mostly in North America, with some returning to AUB and the region. Several assumed leading positions in the US, most notably in pathology is the late Dr. Ramzi Cotran. In recent times and since 1997, the Department took an active role in promoting the educational activities of the Arab Division of the International Academy of Pathology, launching the Arab-British School of Pathology and the Arab School of Pathology, and was instrumental in founding the Arab Board of Pathology under the auspices of the Arab Board of Health Specializations.

For a long time and since the early 1920’s, the clinical services of the Department were set against the standards of the day. There are records of autopsy and surgical pathology reports dating back to 1922 and 1923, respectively. Formalin fixation, paraffin embedding, and microtomy, and shortly thereafter frozen section examination were long utilized since those early days. Histochemistry was also utilized and the Department had a well-organized lab since the early 50’s. Immunohistochemistry followed three decades later. Cytopathology was started in 1953; first focusing on cervicovaginal smears and soon thereafter extended to non-gynecologic specimens and fine needle aspirations. Over the years, the clinical services continued to grow and the quality to improve and the department was accredited by the College of American Pathologists in 2004.

At the Faculty of Medicine of St Joseph University, similar situations presented themselves; the Department of Histology and Anatomic Pathology was founded in 1919 with sole reliance on French instructors for teaching; these faculty members taught pathology in addition to other clinical courses of the medical curriculum. Dr. Theophile Maroun was the first Lebanese to assume faculty position in 1942 and he was followed by Father Flamet who assumed the teaching and service responsibilities until 1965 after which Lebanese pathologists, all trained in France, assumed full responsibilities in that department until today. Because of this historic background, there is also a strong link between the Department of Pathology at St. Joseph University and its teaching hospital, Hotel Dieu de France, with leading universities, academic centers and hospitals in France. The Department enjoys good practices in
surgical pathology and cytopathology and has a postgraduate training program that contributed positively over the years to the practice of pathology in the country and the region.

Pathology had a strong foothold in medical education and clinical service in Lebanon since the founding days of the medical schools in the country. Since its early days, AUB has succeeded in extending its influence in the country and region by setting high standards in the teaching, service and research arms of this medical discipline, thanks to the foresight of its founding faculty. The general impression in the region is that whatever works at AUB can serve as a good model to be emulated by many of the newly established colleges and healthcare facilities. Today, Lebanon has seven medical schools and the region has a mushrooming number of national universities and medical schools and in all, the teaching of pathology is an essential part of all their curricula. Moreover, Lebanon also enjoys a very good standard in the practice of pathology with strong links to the region and the world. The motto of AUB “That they may have life and have it more abundantly” continues to be a driving force to achieve more as we, as a group of AUB pathology faculty members, strive together in the Lebanese and Arab community to carry on with the mission of medicine and build on the rich historical heritage and the newly acquired knowledge through dynamic interactions with colleagues in this region and elsewhere in these vast lands.