

### The human cadaver: the silent teacher of human anatomy

At the medical school where one of us was teaching, a first year medical student came running out of the anatomy class, saying that he could not bear to see a dead body. The smell of formalin and the cadaver disturbed him. He felt that he had joined the medical field to see life, not a dead human body. It was a genuine reaction for a student to have on seeing a cadaver for the first time, in the grim environment of an anatomy department.

From the days when there were many cadavers to dissect, to a time of scarcity, anatomy dissection has traveled a long way. Real dissection is being replaced by virtual e-learning with computer-simulated models in the teaching of gross anatomy. Yet, it is very important that students learn from actual dissection. In an atmosphere where the living are ill treated, it becomes a challenge to teach a reverence for life (1) in the anatomy dissection hall - to make the medical student treat the cadaver with care and respect. St John's Medical College, Bangalore, makes this point when students start their anatomy dissection classes with a prayer thanking the Almighty for giving them a body to learn from.

During the learning of human anatomy, an invisible relationship develops between the student and the cadaver. Michelle Paff, a medical student in the US, has described the process by which she learned to respect the cadaver given for dissection. She writes: "the more I looked at her, the more I realized she used to be a real living person." As she observed the formalin-embalmed body, she created in her imagination the unique identity of a person who made a special gift so that others could learn (2).

At a university in Taiwan, students are informed of the identity of the cadavers they are going to dissect - as well as the identities of the family members of the person whose cadaver

it is. The students visit the family members to thank them, as well as to pay their respects, along with the family members, to the cadaver which allowed them to learn anatomy (3).

According to Ibn Rushd, "He, who is engaged in the science of anatomy, increases his belief in God." (4) However, the anatomical study of the human body has sometimes been problematic because it requires dissection. A number of scholars - religious scholars in particular - seem to be opposed to the practice, since it implies mutilation of God's most noble creation. The utilisation of the human body and organs are supposed to be points of constant debate in Islam (5). Other religions, including Christianity, have their own sociocultural obligations and limitations with the main aim of upholding human dignity and the sanctity of human life. But whatever may be the geo-political-socio-cultural differences, there is a definite bond between the medical student and the cadaver. The sensitivity of Michelle Paff makes us understand what a wonderful gesture a human makes by donating a body for dissection and learning. It informs us also that a compassionate heart, a creative mind and skilled hands are as important as academic and clinical skills for a physician to handle life with care and dignity.

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#### References

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4. Savage-Smith E. Attitudes toward dissection in medieval Islam. *J Hist Med Allied Sci.* 1995 Jan;50(1):67-110
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### Correction

In the Clinical Trials Watch factsheet published in the Apr-Jun 2010 issue of *IJME*, two rows of one part of the table were omitted in the final printed page. The part of the table affected is as follows:

Sponsor Ownership					
Public		15	17	24	25
Private	4	29	57	143	259
Non-profit		2	6	16	8
Public, private		2		2	10
Non-profit, public				1	
Non-profit, private			3	1	2
Individual investigator		3	4	9	6
Individual investigator, public		1	2		1
Individual investigator, non-profit		1	1	1	
Sponsor ownership not known		1	10	14	9