

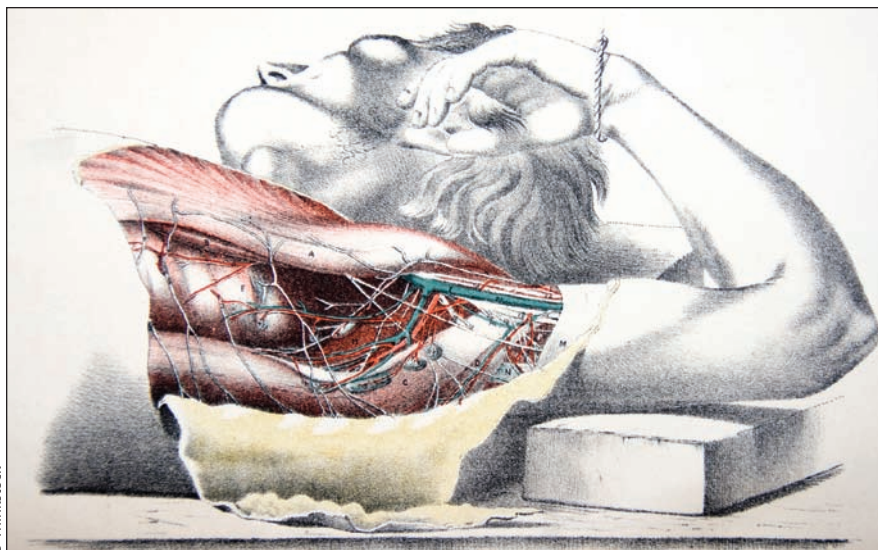
The hidden curriculum

The opportunity to work directly with cadavers to learn the complicated intricacies of the human body was one of the things I looked forward to most about medical school. We were so fortunate for the chance to learn from those generous individuals who donated their bodies to this noble cause. Some institutions rely on textbooks and computer programs to learn this imperative knowledge, but no high-tech program can replace the real thing.

I was under the impression that our transition into the study of anatomy would be slow and gradual. I imagined that the first day would begin with an introduction to the laboratory where we would be spending most of our days for the next few months and an intimate “hello” to a poorly ventilated (but soon very appreciated) locker. There would be no need to do anything just yet, except for maybe some coddling and handholding and a reassuring chat about how to get comfortable with the concept of working closely with human flesh.

I was wrong. Day 1 was more like “uncover and dissect” day. I vividly remember walking into that stark septic space with off-lemon-yellow walls and flickering fluorescent lights and being surrounded by 8 black masses. I could only concentrate on the pungent smell that seemed to permeate every last molecule of the room. Our leader paid no attention to our obvious formaldehyde-induced stupor. Within seconds, the covers were removed and we were face-to-chest with our cadavers.

Our first task was to identify the features of the great vessels and the lungs. By the end of the session I was elbow deep in preserving fluid and fascia, and there they were, in 3D Technicolor glory, the great vessels. My lab partner and I were quite pleased with ourselves. We had made it. We had successfully confronted a real cadaver, without even a smidgen of nausea, and we (maybe more she) had managed to dissect away enough tissue to witness



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the wonders of human plumbing. This class would be a piece of cake.

These first few encounters with the human anatomy were very ritualized. We were painstakingly careful and sensitive, delicately handling dissected flesh, liberally moistening parts with a mystery preserving fluid and covering anatomical areas that could potentially compromise modesty. We were reverent. The class as a whole had a profound respect for the educational privilege. Not only were we learning that the hip bone is connected to the leg bone, but we were also learning that life is precious, even when it is gone. And that “wholeness” matters. The body was not complete without all its parts, even the smallest sinewy threads. In this way, anatomy lab trained us to adopt an empathetic approach to bodies and to treat the sick with grace and dignity.

But anatomy lab also taught us the pragmatic side of medicine — the logical, objective side that allows doctors to make informed, rational decisions based on evidence and data.

As the weeks progressed and exam dates loomed, it was interesting to observe how our extreme caution and trepidation slowly transformed into confidence. We became decisive. Our movements were no longer clumsy, but

were now calculated and assured. In essence, we learned how to take control of our actions and work with the body to attain anatomic knowledge.

These actions were indicative of a major metamorphosis. Students once reticent, some even repulsed, were now able to dissociate feeling from function. We no longer feared the body and death; we now embraced it. We learned to simultaneously respect the fragility of flesh and to critically assess it, laying the groundwork for the building of therapeutic relationships with future patients. These actions represented a considerable shift in philosophy, the first step to becoming a medical doctor. Anatomy lab taught us more than just the basic body plan. It taught us that it is through subtle manoeuvres that doctors are made. Knowledge of the body learned from using our hands to work directly with cadavers moves us from saying to doing and begins the transformation from student to physician. In the medical profession, as in the anatomical laboratory, actions speak louder than words.

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