
 Letters to the Editor

Anatomy: Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic

To the Editor: The current COVID-19 pandemic has challenged medical educators across many disciplines. As an anatomy professor, I am concerned about the challenge of learning anatomy when access to donor-based dissection in labs is limited or nonexistent.

I receive regular solicitation by email to augment my anatomical teaching with the latest teaching aids like online software and virtual, or even augmented, reality. I understand the attraction. The resources needed to set up a modern anatomy lab are substantial.

These new teaching modalities have merit. During the current crisis, the number of these online platform inquiries has increased in proportion to our need for distance learning. Granted, the teaching of anatomy during this time has relied heavily on these modalities. What is less apparent now, but will, I believe, become

manifest later during the transition from student to physician, is the loss of teaching and learning moments that occur daily in the anatomy lab.

We view with too narrow a lens what happens in the anatomy lab during the first year of medical school. The gross anatomy experience is much more than dissecting and learning muscles, nerves, and arteries. It is about care. Care for the individual, one person at a time. I believe these lessons start on the first day with the unveiling of the donor body, in the careful turning, examining, and rewrapping. It is my hope that these rituals of care will be reiterated throughout the life of each physician-to-be. Inherent in our students' work is team building, taking responsibility, and even attention to cleanliness. The anatomy lab becomes a workshop where the virtues of trustworthiness, empathy, compassion, and courage are realized and inculcated.

The lessons we are learning during this pandemic on how to use distance

learning will be most valuable as we forge ahead, perhaps to the next crisis. The essential traits and virtues of a physician, however, are not learned in front of even the most sophisticated computer software. Unless it is mandated by public health measures, let us not be tempted to replace the foundational lessons from our anatomical donors with sole reliance on virtual learning.

The front line of medical care, illustrated daily during this pandemic, is exemplified by the personal engagement between caregiver and patient. That is what our patients expect today in life and is illustrated by those who donate their bodies in death. This is when becoming a physician begins. Our future depends on it.

Disclosures: None reported.

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