



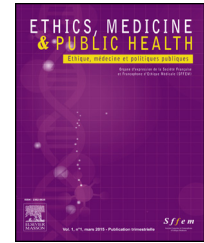
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## STUDIES

# One corpse, two perceptions: Confrontation of sub-Saharan Africa versus French medical students' attitudes toward autopsy related beliefs

*Un corps, deux perceptions : comparaison de l'attitude d'étudiants en médecine, sub-sahariens et français, face aux croyances relatives à l'autopsie*

P. Charlier<sup>a,\*</sup>, L. Brun<sup>a,c</sup>, A. Augias<sup>a</sup>,  
F. Bou Abdallah<sup>a,d</sup>, Y. Boutros Yared<sup>a,e</sup>,  
S. Deo<sup>a</sup>, C. Hervé<sup>f</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Section of Medical and Forensic Anthropology (UVSQ/Paris Descartes University EA 4569), UFR of Health Sciences, 2, avenue de la Source-de-la-Bière, 78180 Montigny-Le-Bretonneux, France

<sup>b</sup> CASH & IPES, avenue de la République, 92000 Nanterre, France

<sup>c</sup> Department of Pathology, University Hospital, Parakou, Benin

<sup>d</sup> Lebanese University, Faculty of Medical Sciences, Hadad, Lebanon

<sup>e</sup> Hôpital Libanais Geitaoui (centre hospitalier universitaire), Beyrouth, Lebanon

<sup>f</sup> Laboratory of Medical Ethics and Forensic Medicine, University of Paris 5, 75006 Paris, France

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### KEYWORDS

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Public health

**Summary** Dissection of a human cadaver is a particular rite of passage for medical students and, for a large majority, constitutes the students' first confrontation with a dead human body. This process can be the subject of various reactions and concerns depending on the sensitivity of each student, due to the cultural beliefs of the individuals concerned. In order to highlight these variations of work related to personal traditions, the experiences of two groups of medical students from Benin and France in the autopsy room were surveyed via a questionnaire. Similarities and differences relating to behaviours and concerns of the physical and spiritual realms are then discussed.

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\* Corresponding author: Section of Medical and Forensic Anthropology (UVSQ/Paris Descartes University EA 4569), UFR of Health Sciences, 2, avenue de la Source de la Bièvre, 78180 Montigny-Le-Bretonneux, France.

E-mail address: [ph.charlier@yahoo.fr](mailto:ph.charlier@yahoo.fr) (P. Charlier).

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## MOTS CLÉS

Mort ;  
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Médecine  
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Philosophie ;  
Santé publique

**Résumé** La dissection d'un cadavre humain est un rite de passage pour tout étudiant en médecine ; et pour une large majorité, c'est leur première confrontation avec un corps humain décédé. Ce processus peut engendrer des réactions et des inquiétudes différentes en fonction des croyances culturelles des personnes concernées. Afin de mettre en évidence les différences de perceptions en fonction des traditions personnelles, nous avons étudié les expériences de deux groupes d'étudiants en médecine dans la chambre d'autopsie, un groupe du Bénin et un autre de France. Nous discutons ensuite des similarités et des différences de comportements et de préoccupations d'ordre physique ou spirituel.

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## Introduction

In a direct continuation of the Hippocratic medical treatise *On Airs, Waters and Places*, explaining that the prognosis of patients varies depending on their environment [1], the doctor's behaviour is, in the same way, subject to this environmental influence, either natural or cultural. Thus, traditional beliefs related to death and the attitude of a young doctor working with human corpses differ depending on the context [2]. This topic has already been the subject of a study in 2011 in Benin, where, during a week of intensive courses in medical anthropology, 77 undergraduate students in their second-to-last (5th) year of medical school at the University of Parakou (60 males and 17 females, from 22- to 34-year-old) participated in a survey to explore the traditional African beliefs and medical students' attitudes towards work on human corpses [3]. This demonstrates the importance of ancestral traditions among future Beninese medical doctors.

The beliefs of the Beninese and the French were compared in order to observe the similarities and differences of these two cultures while working with human remains.

## Materials and methods

In the context of a university course discussing their first scientific autopsies in June 2015, 54 second-year medical students from the University of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ), counting 36 females and 18 males aged 18- to 26-year-old, participated in a study under the same conditions as their colleagues from Benin (same acknowledgment of administrative and ethics authorities). The same printed questionnaire form (designed collectively by all co-authors of this paper) had been handed to each student after his or her first autopsy (printed paper, 30 minutes for answering, full anonymity, native-language (i.e. French), standard questionnaire). All responded to the questionnaire willingly.

## Results

A total of 46% ( $n=25$ ) of the Parisian students estimate that the dead bodies belong to the deceased's family, 39% ( $n=21$ ) to no one, and 22% ( $n=12$ ) think that the decision belongs to the person during his lifetime (multiple answers were possible). The dead body is seen as a "sacred object" for

61% ( $n=33$ ). Ninety-one percent ( $n=49$ ) believe the body deserves respect, but are also disgusted (28%,  $n=15$ ). While anonymity of the body is respected, many Parisian students gave a name to the corpse (45%,  $n=24$ ) during their first dissection, and some of them spoke to the deceased during the work (22%,  $n=12$ ) to familiarise themselves with the situation. The autopsy is not regarded as a profanation of the body (98%,  $n=53$ ), and 76% ( $n=41$ ) did not object to the autopsy of a recently deceased person, although some concerns remained about the restitution delay of the body (30%,  $n=16$ ), the body's fragmentation (52%,  $n=28$ ), the absence of complete restoration of body (50%,  $n=27$ ), the feeling of defilement of the body (31%,  $n=17$ ), alteration of skin barrier (4%,  $n=2$ ), the integrity of the organisation (22%,  $n=12$ ), and disrespect for tradition, local rules, or customs (20%,  $n=11$ ). When it comes to delaying the autopsy by one month, the delay of inhumation of their relatives in order to take back all organs sampled for histological purposes, 61% ( $n=33$ ) did not approve of the decay. Finally, 85% ( $n=46$ ) believe that modern embalming and/or formaldehyde-based conservation is not unnatural. After their first experience of working on the body, only 19% ( $n=10$ ) of students think they will offer their bodies to Science. It appears to many as a waste due to their lack of experience and dexterity, and they seem unwilling for their loved ones to donate their bodies to science.

A single comparison between the results of medical students from the University of Parakou in West Africa [3] and from the University of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ) showed similarities towards certain situations resulting from character and human sensitivity and differences in views related to socio-religious aspects (Fig. 1). Medical procedures performed on the body face apprehension due to cultural traditions, and the corpse is seen as an anatomical subject. It is during the return and/or the burial of the deceased that opinions differ. The fact that some organs will not be replaced in the body after the autopsy (for microscopy purposes) divides the two groups of students. Only 22% ( $n=12$ ) of students in Paris believe this to be a concern when dealing with the body of a close family member, unlike the Beninese students (52%,  $n=40$ ). This can be explained not only by religious convictions, but also by the fact that, in France, the bodies are cremated while in Benin they are buried. It is the same for the repatriation of the body to the country of origin of foreign-born individuals located in Western anthropological collections, where 22% ( $n=12$ ) of the French students are against repatriation (61%,  $n=46$ ). Beninese students are divided as to the vulnerability

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