



## MINIREVIEW

# Paying respect to human cadavers: We owe this to the first teacher in anatomy



Sanjib Kumar Ghosh\*

Department of Anatomy, ESIC Medical College, Gulbarga Sedam Road, Gulbarga, Karnataka 585106, India

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## ABSTRACT

Every human cadaver which undergoes anatomical dissection enriches medical science and deserves to be treated with utmost respect. The aim of the present study is to identify the practices followed by medical schools across the globe to ensure that the human cadaver is treated with respect and dignity while it is utilized within the domain of medical education. The article undertakes a review of the literature and takes note of the practice of students taking an oath prior to dissecting cadavers whereby they reflect on their conduct and habits in the dissection room. It emphasizes the guidelines adopted by medical schools to ensure respectful handling of human cadavers during dissection and highlights traditional ways to honor them followed in some parts of the world. The article attempts to focus on the noble endeavor of funeral ceremonies to pay homage to the departed soul who enlightened the students with the knowledge of human anatomy. Finally it converges on the memorial services incorporated into anatomy programs to instill in students an appreciation of the humanity of those who went under the knife as a service to mankind. Based on the observations made in the present study some recommendations are also proposed regarding good practices in human cadaveric dissection. In order to bind science and humanity it is critical to realize our responsibility to reciprocate the anatomical gift of a human body with respect, compassion, care and dignity.

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## 1. Introduction

Medical students come into contact with the subject of anatomy at the onset of their career and it serves as a platform for learning of all future disciplines. The human cadaver is an indispensable teacher that imparts information and live visualization of the human body. It constitutes a unique educational tool which is exclusive in medical curriculum (Warner and Rizzolo, 2006). Researchers have documented that the cadaver acts as a 'silent mentor' and plays a pivotal role in the development of professionalism among medical students (Arráez-Aybar et al., 2014). In fact, the practice of dissection helps to shape attitudes of future medical practitioners and develop the habits of mind of the clinician (Hamilton et al., 2008; Pawlina et al., 2006). At present, there is no other mode of learning that can supersede the hands-on experience derived from dissecting cadavers. A new generation of evolving learning techniques like computer assisted learning (CAL) and problem based learning (PBL) have their own

benefits, however, the pedagogical merits of dissection have been time tested. Recent studies have found that practical experience with the human cadaver as a teaching tool remains superior in comparison to all other forms of instruction (Biasutto et al., 2006; McLachlan and Patten, 2006; Ghosh, 2016).

By going under the dissection knife, the human cadaver paves the way for the emergence of competent physicians of tomorrow who would serve mankind. As a true teacher, it selflessly guides a student at the threshold of a journey through the marvels of medical science. Without this supreme act of sacrifice, it is nearly impossible for a medical student to comprehend the structural orientation of the human body. Undoubtedly, every human cadaver which undergoes dissection enriches society by an invaluable service, the magnitude of which is beyond description (Arráez-Aybar et al., 2010). In light of the above discussion it is apparent that a human cadaver should be treated with utmost respect while it is being subjected to academic endeavors (Champney, 2011; Jones, 2014; Weeks et al., 1995). Unfortunately, reports repeatedly surface of documented instances in which the dignity of the cadaver has been compromised at various levels (Gangata et al., 2010; Riederer, 2016). Definitely, this is an area of concern in medical education as it could deter potential donors from pledging their mortal remains after death for the advancement of medicine (Bolt et al., 2010). As

\* Correspondence to: P-28, State Bank Garden, Thakurpukur Bazar, Bhakrahat Road, Kolkata, West Bengal 700063, India. Fax: +91 11 4157 1111.

E-mail address: [drsanjib79@gmail.com](mailto:drsanjib79@gmail.com)

body donation programs constitute the sole source of human tissues for anatomical studies in most parts of the world (Biasutto et al., 2014), such misadventures would adversely affect the state of medical education programs. Identification of good practices with regards to human dissection has become essential in the present day. Accordingly, in this article a review of the literature was undertaken to identify the practices followed by medical schools across the globe to ensure that the human cadaver is treated with respect and dignity while it is being utilized within the domain of medical education.

An extensive search of the literature was undertaken using standard search engines, such as Pubmed, Scopus, Google search, Google Scholar and Wikipedia for identification of relevant published material. The following terms were used during the literature search: “respect for human cadaver”, “respectful handling of human cadaver”, “ethical guidelines for cadaveric dissection”, “ethics in cadaveric dissection”, “good practices in human dissection”, “human dissection in anatomy teaching”, “dissection room guidelines”, “respect for body donors”, “honoring body donors” and “dissection and medical education”. For this study, observations made in research articles, review articles, brief communications as well as letters and editorials published after the year 2000 were taken into account when found to be relevant. However, a few earlier published articles were also consulted when the findings were perceived as significant with respect to the outcome of the present study.

## 2. Practice of oath taking before anatomical studies

Undertaking an oath prior to cadaveric dissection is a novel way to introduce the basic elements of bioethics to first-year medical students (Morar et al., 2008). In other words, the practice of oath taking at the onset of the dissection schedule, whereby students pledge to show respect and gratitude toward the cadaver, could possibly ensure that, as future clinicians, they would treat each and every patient with due respect and dignity. An oath is a statement made in public, whereby the person concerned agrees to follow certain guidelines. Cadaveric oath is an avenue to emphasize to students that the cadaver presently lying before them and waiting to be dissected was once alive and belonged to the same society to which the students belong (Sawant et al., 2015). Moreover the cadaveric oath enables students to comprehend the eventual fate of life, which, in turn, leads them to appreciate the actual value of life (Lala, 2016).

The practice of cadaveric oath has been included in the anatomical curriculum by medical schools in different parts of the globe. The students in the Anatomy Department, National University of Singapore, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine have to recite a solemn oath at the onset of academic session with gloved hands placed on cadavers lying on gurneys in front of them. Accordingly, students pledge to treat the once living human body with dignity as they dissect the same to further their professional goals. Further, they also declare that they would conduct themselves in a manner in line with the highest standards of professionalism (Prakash et al., 2007). In Liverpool, United Kingdom, to ensure that the expectations of a health care professional are made explicit from the outset, medical students are required to assent to the Declaration of Geneva (the contemporary World Medical Association equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath) on their first day of medical school. During the ceremony, all students recite the memorized oath in unison, thus creating a feeling of dedication toward mankind, which guides their behavior in the dissection room and beyond (Ali et al., 2015). At the School of Medicine, Oregon Health & Science University, Portland, Oregon, United States, the White Coat Ceremony is undertaken for students entering the profession of medicine, whereby the

students stand together to recite the oath of Geneva. In doing so, the students pledge to dedicate themselves to their teachers, future patients and to support each other at all times. Such a ceremony creates an important focus area for the students to respect their first teacher (human cadaver) as they begin their medical career with anatomical studies (Snelling et al., 2003).

Recently, the Department of Basic Medical Sciences at the Durban University of Technology, followed the above trend as their first-year anatomy students undertook a modified Hippocratic Oath, whereby they swore to treat the mortal remains of human bodies with respect while conducting their studies in the dissection room. Subsequent to this, the faculty members sensitized the students to the fact that they were fortunate enough to dissect a human body and to have hands on experience in the study of the structure of the human body. They also guided the students to carry themselves in an exemplary manner which reflects the conduct of an ideal health professional from the beginning of the anatomy course (Satyapal, 2012). In India, K.J. Somaiya Medical College, Sion, Mumbai, has pioneered this trend. Here students are required to recite the cadaveric oath on the first day of their anatomy course. The oath is administered by the Head of the Department of anatomy along with other faculties of the department and the Dean of the Institute. The ceremony is an emotionally charged moment, where students stand around a cadaver with their right hand lifted up and pointing in the direction of the cadaver. They recite the oath from a printed copy held with their left hand (Lala, 2016; Sawant et al., 2015).

The practice of cadaveric oath presents an opportunity for the students to reflect upon their conduct in the dissection room and in particular their handling of the human cadaver. It guides them to the realization that the cadaver should be considered as their ‘first teacher’ as well as ‘silent mentor’ and not merely learning material. The trend is becoming popular around the world as is evident from the discussion above and it is a relatively new element that has been inducted into the exercise of human dissection. Notably available literature from Asian countries refers to a specific term “cadaveric oath” in this regard, whereas elsewhere it is a modified version of the Hippocratic Oath.

## 3. Handling human cadavers with respect

The human cadaver is a complex, socially constructed entity, laden with all possible attributes, from frivolous to tragic to sinister to religious. However, in the context of an anatomy dissection room, it is a teacher whose function is not to symbolize mortality but to help us learn about the elements that supported life (Jones, 2014; Sañudo et al., 2007). Developing an ideal balanced viewpoint for the human cadaver is a challenge for first-year medical students who are, in general, young members of the society (Weeks et al., 1995). Hence predesigned guidelines governing the behavior and habits of medical students in the dissection is significant in this regard.

In the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology, Indiana University School of Medicine, Bloomington, Indiana, United States, the faculty emphasizes the importance of proper care and respect for the human bodies throughout the duration of human anatomy course, and they ensure that the students realize their responsibility toward maintaining proper professional conduct in this regard. Detailed accounting of the status and location of all anatomical material in the department is meticulously maintained and special care is taken such that tissues from each cadaver remain with the same cadaver during the dissection classes (Ousager and Johannessen, 2010). At Mt. San Antonio College, Connecticut, United States, a set of regulations regarding cadaveric handling is handed to the participants of the human anatomy dissection course at the very beginning. Accordingly, taking any photographs

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