Reflection on Gross Anatomy

Gross Anatomy was a class that I was excited about and really looking forward to. For me, it seemed like a rite of passage. Being given the responsibility of a cadaver and being able to work with them in such a hands-on way was something only students in our field got to experience. It meant that we were really medical students, and that one day this experience will help us to become doctors. I had no apprehension of finally being given a donor body and being able to see and feel everything I had only heard about before regarding the human body.

Upon entering the gross lab for the first time, it still had not hit me yet that this is someone who could have been walking on the streets not too long ago. It wasn’t until we took the plastic wrap off...
that I realized how real this experience was going to be. He had nails, hair all over, and big eyes that made him become alive to me. It took me a second to take in the fact that this man had given such a big sacrifice to us and I would be indebted to a man that I could not thank.

As the class went on, I would realize that sometimes it was hard to remember that Winston had been a man that was kind and brave enough to donate his body to students to learn. It was so easy to become lost in the physical human body, I would lose sight of his spirit and his contribution. What made it easier to bring me back was that Winston had been a research chemist, and I feel like he would appreciate that his body is being used for science and is still going on teaching.

Nowadays, a sense of calmness comes over me when dissecting Winston. Yes, I realize that he has passed away and is no longer here, but it gives me hope in life after death. For Winston, he chose his death not to be the end of his story. He chose to live on in our minds as our donor and by teaching us about the human body through his death. Death does not have to be something with such great finality. And Winston chose to live on.

—Sonya Shah

My Own Cadaver Story

Disclaimer: this essay contains my original submission for Physician and Patient with an added revision of my feelings and thoughts after Cutting Cold Flesh.

Each morning on the way to class, I usually take the back route to get into the building; pass the Women’s Institute and the back of the gross lab. Once I get close enough to the building, I am usually overwhelmed with the now familiar smells of embalming fluids from the lab. Initially, the smell repulsed me along with the thought of working with a cadaver. I also wondered about how I would react on my first day of lab when the covers are unwrapped from the cadavers and I would be required to start dissecting. Would I faint, would my hands shake? Ironically, I am very interested in surgery so what kind of surgeon faints or gets grossed out about dissections? Those questions as well as feelings of uncertainty plagued me on the days leading up to my first gross lab.

On the morning of my lab, I arrived very early for lab. In addition, I was dressed in my scrubs an hour earlier before the start of class. I was anxious. I was excited. I got to lab and quickly found my group table. As I stood by my cadaver, another question popped in my mind, do I have a male or female cadaver? I always imagined that a male cadaver would be a little less awkward to dissect because I am more “familiar” with my own body and the structures that are supposed to be in each region. Being early, none of my group members had arrived by then, so I nervously touched the cadaver under its wraps and touched the chest to feel for any obvious structures such as enlarged breast tissue which would normally indicate a female cadaver. In retrospect, this may have been disrespectful, but I did it to appease my own mind. My initial guess was that I had a male cadaver. I was so wrong! Once the covers were unwrapped, I noticed my first error in judgment regarding live versus dead tissue: for lack of a better expression, “everything sags when dead.” Finally, I realized that it was not about me or my fears, it was ultimately about the learning experience: could I bond with my group members over the upcoming months to learn the relevant structures? Towards the end, I said a little prayer, thanking the lady for donating her body to us and for giving me the experience towards being the best future surgeon.

ADDENDUM:

After a few months of working with the cadaver in lab, I am happy to say that I did not faint during my first encounter with the body and my anxieties have gone away. My lab group and I decided
to name our female cadaver, Edith, because we believed that it was an old-fashioned name to match her demographics as a white, 74-year old female. We also chose this name because we felt like the name of our cadaver should not the name of someone we knew personally. Based on what was presented during our lecture “Cadaver and Identity”, I believe that I am one of the persons who would want to know more about their cadaver. The information that our group was given in lab that she was a former food service worker with chronic heart failure and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease just is not sufficient. I find myself wanting to know how she spent her final days and did she pass away peacefully.

Moreover, seeing the cadaver reminds me of my own mortality and humanity. The grim truth that we all have to die one day is ever-present in the lab. Now I think about the life I aspire to live before I die and what will people have to say about me when I do pass. To this end, I have an admiration and greater respect for our body donors like Edith who did a selfless deed with their last wish to donate their bodies. Personally, I may never donate my body as a cadaver because of my culture’s strong rituals about death and burials; however, I respect the courage of other individuals who do choose whole body donation.

—Richard Smith

Reflection on anatomy lab

Human beings always have something to teach one another. In today's ever growing interconnected world, we are constantly emphasizing the need for added experience and interconnectedness. Taking gross anatomy in medical school is very similar to today's philosophies. Gross anatomy allows you to see, to feel, to be surprised. With the amount of work we are required to complete in medical school, it is easy to forget why we are in anatomy lab - probably the most important class in medical school. During the first two years of medical school we are constantly learning about medicine through text and digital media. We learn of disease states through patients such as AW, CL, or BK, but we never truly find out who the patient is, they are simply in our readings. Gross anatomy is completely different, in anatomy you see who the person is.

As I proceeded through the course it got more and more difficult to imagine my cadaver as a human being. As we slowly reflected and took out every piece of the body, what lay in front of me did not seem to resemble a human. However, it is key to remind yourself that the body that lies in front of you was human. He or she at one point experienced what the world had to offer, held opinions of their own, loved, was loved, and possibly raised children. Each individual cadaver - at some point before they passed away - made a conscious decision to stay connected to people even after they had departed. They chose to teach through their bodies.

With the pace of medical school being what it is today, we often forget why we are allowed to cut cold flesh. The days of grave robbing are over. We live in a world of information and understanding where people care about contributing to the practice of medicine, and making sure that doctors stay connected to humanity. Our cadavers are not the murderers and rapists of the past, they are friends, siblings, parents, and children. We owe it to them to dissect every piece of anatomy and leave no area unexposed, or else we have not kept our part of the bargain.

—Vladislav Bekerman
Oh, Anatomy!

Oh, Anatomy! How daunting ye seemed!
A rite for the initiated few, and yet, what a dream!

And how with the time, did that mystery fade
Lost to the hours of labor and short sleep

Replaced with a sense of humility and respect
But still with the excitement which fear often sets

For dense with detail, and needy you are
Mastery of your subject makes for being above-par

Sad will I be, when our time finally ends
Forever shall I remember this time amongst friends

—Daniel Benito