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OPINION ARTICLE

A Eulogy for Our Anatomical Donors [version 1]

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Abstract

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Each year the University of Alabama at Birmingham provides a memorial service for the families and loved ones of their anatomical donors. It is a ceremony of remembrance and gratitude, for those who dedicate themselves to the advancement of medicine. "A Eulogy for Our Donors" is an excerpt from a speech given by one of UAB's students to the families of Alabama donors, as a eulogy to their contributions, and exemplifying the importance and continued relevance of this learning tool in modern medical education.

Keywords

Anatomy education, Body donors, Medical Education, Medical humanity, Memorial ceremony

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Corresponding author: Benjamin Smood (bsmood@uab.edu)

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A Eulogy for Our Anatomical Donors

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Abstract

Each year the University of Alabama at Birmingham provides a memorial service for the families and loved ones of their anatomical donors. It is a ceremony of remembrance and gratitude, for those who dedicate themselves to the advancement of medicine. "A Eulogy for Our Donors" is an excerpt from a speech given by one of UAB's students to the families of Alabama donors, as a eulogy to their contributions, and exemplifying the importance and continued relevance of this learning tool in modern medical education.

Keywords: Anatomy education; Body donors; Medical Education; Medical humanity; Memorial ceremony

Introduction

Anatomical donations in medical education require the sacrifice and contributions from both the donor and those closest to them. Each year, medical schools across the United States provide a memorial service at the end of each school year.¹ Below is an excerpt from a student's address to families at an annual memorial service, and his perspective on the impact of these donors. It is a tribute to their contributions, exemplifying the importance and continued relevance of this learning tool in modern medical education. It is a celebration for students' earliest and most intimate educators in medicine, and is an opportunity to thank families for their sacrifice and role in donation.^{2,3} It is necessary to routinely remind ourselves of the importance of appreciating our donors and the families who so graciously lend their bodies to us, with the same compassion that we expect of ourselves for our patients.

Excerpt

Of course, nothing can remove the feeling of a lost loved one. The abruptness, even when anticipated. The pain, even when expecting some sort of relief. In remembrance and celebration, we find remorse. How ironic, that our greatest feelings of pride, bring our deepest feelings of sorrow. While only time can heal, there forever remains a

scar—whereby we honor, and refuse to forget. We cannot pretend that these wounds do not exist, but must realize that the grief felt is only part of a much larger story in the many lives that have been impacted by these loved ones.

It is in the anatomy lab that we find ourselves until the early hours of the morning. Studying, understanding, tracing the paths unforeseen, and visualizing a future that lies ahead. Still, we ponder the stories of each of our donors. Who they are, where they came from—wondering about a tattoo, a scar, certain freckles. In what branch of the military did they serve? Their calluses—were they a gear head? Are these the hands of a physician? Some are 70 or 80 years old. What have they seen over so many years?

Whose shoulder did they cry on when everyone else had left the room? Did they always keep their emotions in? Certainly, they told many great stories—some that probably got a little old. It's funny how we now wish we could hear them told just one more time.

How strong these individuals must have been. How strong their families are. Again we are reminded of their peacefulness, and thankful for such selflessness. For in their rest, with the family's grace, we begin the first step in fulfilling our biggest dreams. For that we are forever indebted with gratitude.

Frank Netter is a physician turned artist whose textbooks have been used for decades.⁴ His self-described Sistine Chapel of the human body elegantly illustrates the relationships of our body's thousands of veins, nerves and organs.⁵ It is a daunting task to understand these, and though beautiful, the pages do not do justice to such intricate relationships necessary for the practice of medicine. It is only through experience, through the tracings of these interconnections that brings realization to their marvel and significance. Although we may groan when asked to recall information on a test, we smile at the opportunity to study and explore in the name of medicine.

So many structures are often hidden by surrounding tissues. Each time we step foot in the operating room and clinic, the surgeons and clinicians quiz us on the delicate structures we must avoid or examine. It is only through the guidance of our familiarity with the human body, through our partnership with these donors, that we avoid grave errors. This simply cannot be learned through a textbook.

As physicians in training, the donations of families and their loved ones have left us with an enduring edifice upon which to build our knowledge of the human body. By better understanding the anatomy and physiology in its purest form, we can begin to recognize pathologies and abnormalities in contrast. Their sacrifices and donations have changed not only our lives, but have undoubtedly prepared us to better care for the individuals we will meet and treat in the future. As such, their contributions, indeed the family's contributions, have an impact that will reverberate and transcend the walls of our universities.

Our donors trusted us with their care, confiding in our inquiries with the highest level of intimacy. We are honored to work with them, and have learned so much. We will carry these experiences throughout our encounters with future patients, who will graciously yield their bodies to us for inspection and discovery, and when we are ready, treatment. We are forever instilled with a humanity, humility, and a graciousness that we can only hope to reciprocate for others in our lifetimes and beyond.

Take Home Messages

The use of anatomical donors in medical education continues to be an integral part of student learning. This excerpt hopes to inspire reflection amongst trainees and educators for the sacrifice of donors and their loved ones'

for their commitment to advancing the next generation of physicians and scientists.

Notes On Contributors

Benjamin Smood earned his Bachelor of Science in biology and political science at the University of Oregon. He is currently a 3rd year medical student at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the UAB Anatomical Donor Program, for organizing the ceremony of remembrance. He thanks all the guests, students, and faculty who participated in the service.

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Appendices

Declarations

The author has declared that there are no conflicts of interest.

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Saee Deshpande

Maharashtra University of Health Sciences, Nashik- VSPM Dental College Nagpur

This review has been migrated. The reviewer awarded 3 stars out of 5

This is a very heart-warming and well expressed speech coming from a medical student. Although the concept is novel and should be replicated in other healthcare institute, it's role as a scientific publication is limited.

Competing Interests: No conflicts of interest were disclosed.

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Mohammed Osman

General organization for teaching hospitals

This review has been migrated. The reviewer awarded 4 stars out of 5

An interesting personal view to readers as it focused on a hidden aspect in medical education. The author is inspired with the sacrifice of anatomical donors. And we as educators and students should respect their great support. However, I find the tone very emotional. Moreover, I don't think that tone is the best one especially in scientific publication. Furthermore, this emotional language made the manuscript sometimes difficult to be understood for readers.

Competing Interests: No conflicts of interest were disclosed.

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Trevor Gibbs

AMEE

This review has been migrated. The reviewer awarded 3 stars out of 5

Many medical and healthcare schools around the world now have a service to commemorate and give thanks to those who donate their bodies to the advancement of medical science- this is a good example of one such eulogy. It is written in a sensitive manner that reflects some very deep and interesting thoughts. These eulogies are often very personal but I think this paper may give some ideas to other students and other schools on how perhaps to construct such a respectful document.

Competing Interests: No conflicts of interest were disclosed.
