

Cadaveric Oath: The need of the hour

Manisha R. Gaikwad

Additional Professor & HOD, Dept. of Anatomy, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

Email: manishagaikwad6719@yahoo.in

Abstract

In today's scenario the doctor –patient relationship is getting from bad to worse because of the lack of communication skills in undergraduate students pursuing medicine. Acquiring knowledge through dissection of human body is an age old concept started in 15th century by barber surgeons to demonstrate the structures of human body. Importance of cadaveric dissection for learning anatomy helps the students in developing spatial and tactile appreciation of the structures which cannot be obtained by prosected specimens or computerised learning aids. Cadaver being their first teacher, students should be imbued with the moral values and have gratitude towards the cadaver for helping them understand the structures of the body by way of dissection. Cadaveric oath recitation will help the students in developing empathy with the cadaver as a "SILENT TEACHER" and in the long run with the patients while serving the humanity by way of medical practice.

Keywords: Cadaveric oath, Doctor-patient relationship, Silent teacher, Anatomy teaching, Cadaveric dissection.

Introduction

Human Anatomy in many parts of the world is taught by way of whole body dissection wherein the students get a chance to dissect organs and muscles, tracing their blood and nerve supply. The cadavers used for medical teaching and research are generously bequeathed for benefit of medical education, hence these are termed as "Silent Teachers".^(1,2) Medical students after getting admission to a medical college have their first encounter with the cadaver for learning the structures of human body. But students are often seen making a fun of the cadaver, showing disrespect and do not sympathize with the cadaver who had made a will to give upon his/her whole body after death for medical research.⁽³⁾

The importance of cadaveric dissection for learning Anatomy helps the students in developing spatial and tactile appreciation of the structures which they cannot learn from models, textbooks or 3D programs, variation between individuals, the effects of any disease to the body etc.⁽⁴⁾ Students should therefore learn how to treat the human remains with dignity and confidentiality.^(5,6)

In today's scenario the doctor –patient relationship is getting from bad to worse because of the lack of communication skills in undergraduate students pursuing medicine. Daily there is trending news about assault on doctors or they are sued by patient's relatives under consumer protection act.⁽⁷⁾ Throughout the world there is now an emphasis on the fact that human cadavers should be treated with respect as this is the first teacher of the students.⁽¹⁾ And the goodwill of the person who pledged to donate his body for medical research should always be remembered. Thus, at the outset cadaveric oath should be taken by the undergraduate students to inculcate the attitude of respect and gratitude from the very beginning.⁽⁸⁾

Cadaveric oath taking ceremony

It is a unique way of medical students to express their respect and gratitude to the donors and their families.⁽⁹⁾ The newly admitted undergraduate students assembled in the dissection hall along with the faculty of the department. I as head of the department briefed the students about the importance of cadaveric dissection for learning Anatomy in first year of medical curriculum. One senior faculty member apprised them on the importance of body donation and preservation of these donated bodies for medical research. Later the class representative recited the cadaveric oath along with all the students present in a position of lifted right hand in front of the cadaver.

The oath taking ceremony for paying respect to the cadaver makes one emotional and cannot thank enough to the family members for this noble gesture. It creates a sense of awareness amongst them that those were the people who were alive once with a life full of dreams, aspirations like them and hence deserve to be treated with respect as living people.⁽³⁾

Importance of body donation

Donating one's body for medical research and education is a noble gesture by which a person can give back to the society. As suggested by Delmas voluntary body donation is a will pledged by a person during life.^(5,10) Acquiring knowledge through dissection of human body is an age old concept started way back in 15th century by barber surgeons to demonstrate the structures of human body. Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) was the first medical student to dissect the cadaver. In those days cadavers were procured by digging the graves or by stealing the body from the mortuary. Thus the Anatomy Act 1832 was passed by which unclaimed bodies were provided to medical schools.⁽¹¹⁾

In India the voluntary organ/body donation programme is gaining momentum through the whole body/organ donation awareness drive for the masses by the some governmental and non-governmental organisations. To some extent the shortage of cadavers is taken care of, by this noble gesture by the citizens. So the medical students should demonstrate respect, compassion, empathy and emotional support at all times to the patients and the families of those who donate the cadavers.



Photographs of the cadaveric oath ceremony conducted in the department of Anatomy at All India Institute of Medical Sciences Bhubaneswar, Odisha in presence of all faculty members of the department of anatomy and the newly admitted undergraduate medical students in the dissection hall. This was to inculcate in the medical students professional values, attitudes so that they hold the cadavers in high esteem as their “Silent teacher”

Conclusion

Cadaver being their first teacher, students should be imbibed with the moral values and have gratitude towards the cadaver for helping them understand the structures of the body by way of dissection which is not at all comparable to any of the modern day virtual dissected or prospected anatomical specimens. And the goodwill of the person who pledged to donate his body for medical research should always be remembered.

Cadaveric oath recitation will help the students in developing empathy with the cadaver as a “Silent Teacher” and in the long run with the patients while serving the humanity by way of medical practice. A cordial doctor-patient relationship defines the uniqueness of medical profession on which depends the medical practice. Hence the basics of Bioethics is been introduced in the medical curriculum by which the best professional values can be imbibed in the students.

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