



## Reflections

# Anatomy lessons

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In the first semester of medical school, my understanding of the word *teacher* was challenged and broadened. During the initial weeks of biology review, we jumped from studying pregnancy to examining the properties of DNA, and each change in topic brought with it a whole new set of teachers. This first type of teacher was a *lecturer*, often a different professor each day, who spoke from the front of our lecture theatre and addressed the entire class of 288 people. The second type of teacher we encountered was a *tutor*, a physician or expert from the community who daily guided small groups of students in “problem-based learning” discussions. Tutors observed, sometimes offering words of guidance, as the members of the group brainstormed on complex hypothetical medical problems. We spent 4 to 6 weeks with each tutor, then switched groups and began with another, unknown tutor.

There was, however, a third sort of teacher, the only teacher who would stay with each medical student for the full year. On the first day of classes, we were told that this teacher would not only help us more consistently than any other but also teach us the most critical lessons of our medical school training. You can imagine how I and my classmates leaned forward, eager to make the acquaintance of this new instructor. And then the lecturer declared: “Yes, your *cadaver* will be your most valuable teacher.”

We fell back in stunned silence, digesting this startling statement. Only that morning we had been learning about the origins of life and pregnancy, and now, just a few hours later, we were being confronted with the stark reality of lives completed, bodies on gurneys ... our most valuable teachers?


Each Friday afternoon that year we entered the pristine white cadaver laboratory. Each Friday we were reminded of the sacred learning opportunity before us. Each Friday I was faced with seemingly irreconcilable contrasts. I sought to learn about life and healing from those whose lives had passed on. I began my journey of learning underground, in a cold room, with a silent teacher. I left the laboratory with greatly increased medical knowledge, but also with questions—both practical and philosophical.

Even now, in my third year of medical school, my thoughts have not solidified into any sort of conclusion about the nature of life or the meaning of death. My weekly anatomy encounters still provoke me to

regularly ponder and reflect on this multifaceted medical school blend of philosophical and physiological learning. For now, I can only say with assurance that my ability to appreciate the complexity and value of learning has vastly increased—not only from attending lectures but also from this exposure to lives completed and the profound gifts—bodies—donated to us for study.

In the latter part of our first semester, our medical school class held a memorial service to honour the gifts of the donors and their families. After all, our learning in the laboratory is only possible because these individuals chose to donate their bodies or the bodies of loved ones for this purpose. The service was moving and powerful, as students shared songs, poems, narratives, and artwork reflecting their thoughts and gratitude.

Afterward, we were encouraged to speak with the families of the donors. The prospect was intimidating. What could we say in the face of these generous gifts—so critical to our learning and yet so shrouded in mystery? Our nerves held us back; we wondered what we could talk about with the families. I finally walked over and just sat down beside a family. I ended up spending much of the reception talking with an incredible 94-year-old woman whose husband was a donor to the anatomy program. The hope and enthusiasm of a much younger woman shone through her words as she generously shared many stories about her life. I found her desire to hear about my learning and her excitement for my future both astonishing and encouraging.

This window, however brief, into her life and the life of her late husband challenged me once again to consider the notion of *learning*. While the memorial service might have been planned as an event for the families, I found this encounter to be transforming. Through this conversation, this lovely elderly woman joined the ranks of my esteemed lecturers and tutors. Our sharing of stories as we explored our strange and uncommon bond brought home to me that perhaps the most life-altering lessons we learn are taught this way. It seems that despite the importance of lectures and professional discourse, some of the most pivotal teaching and learning moments take the most fundamental form—sincere, open interaction with another human being. 

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**Competing interests**  
None declared

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