

Points for my Comments

I've had the privilege of working with the director and students in the anatomy course for many years and during that time I've come to realize what a powerfully impactful experience anatomy is. For students it is a rite of passage, what sets them on the path to becoming real doctors. And it's not just students who are affected by anatomy. Physicians 20 and 30 years into their careers will still reference their experiences in anatomy with awe and reverence. I'd like to take just a few moments to share some thoughts about why this experience is so significant. I think the answer lies in the essential role of the donor as teacher and guide.

So what do students learn from donors? Of course, they learn factual knowledge about human anatomical structure and organization, and this is important so that when they get to be real doctors, they know the difference between a heart and a liver. But there are other equally important lessons students learn as well.

- 1) Working with donors teaches a lesson in humility to students. Students put in an incredible amount of effort to master a massive amount of information in anatomy; and there is always more to learn. Confronted with the overwhelming complexity of the human body, they are learning a lesson about recognizing how much they will never know, and how the ultimate authority, the ultimate teacher will always be the patient in front of them.
- 2) The second lesson donors impart has to do with always treating patients with respect, and ensuring their dignity and humanity at all costs. How the donors are treated in the anatomy lab foreshadows how patients will be treated in outpatient clinics and hospital wards. The way students learn to care for the donors, with respect for their dignity, lays down patterns for how they will behave toward living patients.
- 3) The third lesson students receive from donors that they can apply to their future patients is the power of connection and caring. Despite the fact that the donor is no longer a living person, in the anatomy lab you can sometimes, at certain moments, feel what the philosopher Martin Buber called an I-Thou – a person-to-person – connection with donors. I am surprised and touched at the number of times a student has confided that, during a particular dissection, she held a donor's hand, to let them know they were not alone. Or when I learn that another student, late at night in the anatomy lab, reviewing structures for an upcoming exam, started talking to the donor about his hopes and fears about a life in medicine. Or when I hear a student wondering why a particular donor has pink nail polish on her fingertips, and purple polish on her toes. Or when another student wishes he could know why a broken heart and the name Emily is tattooed on another donor's forearm. These moments remind students of the donors' humanity as well as about the power of connecting with and caring about not only

the diseases that people have but the people themselves who will be their future patients.

- 4) The final lesson students learn from donors is one of service and altruism. Donors are the best role models students will ever have for learning about acts of unbelievable giving without expectation of anything in return; and of putting the interests of others above themselves. Though students can never equal donors in their ultimate act of selfless generosity, they too have chosen lives of service; and they have much to learn every time they are in the presence of a donor.

Students know they can never sufficiently repay the donors for all these lessons. But they do feel immensely grateful for the great gift they have been given. And what they discover over time is that the best way to fulfill the intentions and hopes of the donors is to learn as much as they can; and to carry forward into their own interactions with living patients all the lessons the donors have offered them. Long after the anatomy course has ended, the donors still accompany the students, reminding them gently to be humble, respectful, and caring toward all patients, to be generous, and to be grateful for the privilege of giving to others, as their donors gave to them.