

THE WILLED BODY PROGRAM

A Last, Loving Gift

BY JUDITH WALL
Photos by Robert Taylor

Considered the bellwether course for medical education, the gross anatomy lab can be a baptism of fire for beginning medical students.

In the very first semester of their medical education, young people who may never have seen a dead person or held a scalpel find themselves faced with the frightening and difficult task of dissecting an actual human body. Often students have coped by making light of the experience. Many would even give their cadaver a clever nickname. At OU and nationwide, faculty members have tended to discourage any sort of speculation about the individuals who donated their bodies and generally refer to each cadaver by an assigned number. The actual names of the donors and any sort of biographical information about them never were revealed. The common wisdom has been that keeping the gross anatomy lab experience as impersonal as possible helps the students get through it.

A daring program at the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine has done an about-face on that common wisdom. The first lesson for its students is one of humanism.

For the past three years, the gross anatomy course begins with an extraordinary event that brings together first-year medical students and the families of anatomical donors. The venue is a luncheon with each of 19 sets of family members paired with the team of students assigned to their loved one's body. This annual event is thought to be the first of its kind for any medical school in the nation.

At this year's luncheon, College of Medicine Executive Dean M. Dewayne Andrews, M.D., told the families, "By donating their bodies for this purpose, your loving family members have a significant role in the education and training of a new generation of physicians. Through this program of meeting you, our students will learn about the lives of their anatomical donors, their joys and sadness, their tribulations and successes, and gain greater respect for the human body. What an extraordinary gift—a gift that will touch the lives of many more in ways yet unknown."

The families often share photograph albums and mementos as they introduce students to their relative. All the family members seem to take a great deal of satisfaction

**An unique program
removes the
anonymity
surrounding
anatomical donors
and introduces
their families
to the
OU medical students
who benefit from this
final benevolence.**



The gratitude felt by OU medical students toward their willed body benefactors is expressed in this remarkable Paul Moore sculpture, a project of the Class of 2001, which faces the Stanton L. Young Walkway at OUHSC.

in the task. Not surprisingly, many are moved to tears as they talk about this individual. Students also can be seen dabbing their eyes.

First-year student Jonathan Heinlen recalls how emotional the experience was for him when he and the other seven students in his lab group met the daughter and son-in-law of their anatomical donor.

"I was tense at first," the Tulsa student says. "Then I realized they were just as tense as I was."

But the tension soon faded. "The daughter and her husband seemed really to enjoy talking about her mother."

Heinlen and his lab partners learned that their anatomical donor was an elderly woman from Enid. She spent most of her working life employed by a government agency but had always wanted to be a teacher. The students learned about the joys and sorrows in her life and what her interests were. By the end of the luncheon they knew that she had been a warm, caring human being who had loved and been loved in return.

They also knew her reasons for willing her body to medicine. "Her daughter explained that it allowed her to do something in death that she had not been able to do in life and that was to become a teacher," Heinlen says.

For in a very real sense, people who donate their bodies are teachers, he points out.

"There is no replacement for the gross anatomy lab," he says. "In textbooks and computer models, the structures are always perfect, but in reality they are different in every person. Every artery takes a somewhat different path. We couldn't know that without this experience."

Family members often want to explain why their loved one decided to make this last precious donation. At the 2001 luncheon, the daughter of one donor explained, "My father always said that, after living through four years of war in the South Pacific, everything from then on was a gift. And so in 1983, he signed himself up as an anatomical donor as a payback on the gift."

Another family member explained, "My 'pop' gave his body because he believed that each person only has so many

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opportunities to touch others, and his body was his last gift.”

The 19 anatomical donors used in this year's gross anatomy lab came from many walks of life. There were nurses, homemakers and office workers. Other occupations included music teacher, truck driver, plumber, laborer, attorney and international sales executive. Several of the donors had seen military service.

Heinlen believes the luncheon was an invaluable experience for him and his classmates. The photographs and information shared by family members helped them understand that the donors were not simply laboratory specimens but had once been living, breathing human beings and therefore worthy of profound respect.

At the end of the semester-long human anatomy course, the family members are invited to a memorial service the students hold for that year's anatomical donors. It is a somber occasion attended by the dean and faculty members. Students offer tributes to the donors often using poetry or other readings to express their respect and gratitude.

Pamela Lawson, director of the OU College of Medicine's Educational Support Services Office, also directs the college's Willied Body Program, which supplies cadavers to the Health Sciences Center and Norman campuses. Lawson and her staff also administer the State Anatomical Board and provide cadavers to the nine other institutions of higher learning in the state that offer a laboratory course in human anatomy.

The Willied Body Program follows



Pamela Lawson, left, here with first-year medical student Jonathan Heinlen, of Tulsa, in the Gross Anatomy Laboratory, directs the ground-breaking OU College of Medicine's Willied Body Program.



The gross anatomy lab experience causes Dissection Group 15 to form its own identity during their semester-long work with a willied body. Back row, from left, are: Jonathan Heinlen, Matthew Diesselhorst, Adriene Emel and Rishi Behl; front row: Jennifer Cole, M. Connor Cross and Lee Chinowth.

procedures established by the board, Lawson explains.

"Before cadavers can be issued, the college has to be approved by the board and agree to comply with its policies as to security and handling of the cadavers," she says. "For example, visitors are not allowed in human anatomy labs except under very special circumstances."

Lawson adds that the board's regulations are "stringently enforced."

In the past, there was often a shortage of willed bodies in the state, but that is no longer the case, Lawson points out. "There seems to be a greater willingness on the part of many individuals to make this final gift to medical education."

Lawson admits that the annual luncheon for the families of anatomical donors has made her job more difficult.

Previously, she selected cadavers for the gross anatomy lab based on such criteria as an equal percentage of males and females and a reasonably normal anatomy. Now she must also select anatomical donors with family members willing to meet with the medical students who will be learning from their loved one's body.

She explains that not all of those who will their bodies have listed a next of kin on their donor form. And sometimes family members listed on those forms live out of state or subsequently have died.

After she forms a list, the dean's office sends out invitations, and Lawson and her staff follow up with phone calls. Often family members are too elderly or ill to attend. Others, while they might approve of the concept, fear the emotional toll the luncheon might take. It may take a second round of invitations to round out the guest list.

But Lawson definitely believes the outcome is well worth the effort. Since the luncheons began, she has seen an increased respect by the students for the anatomical donors. And for the family members who choose to attend, the luncheon provides an opportunity for them to memorialize a loved one who had forgone the usual funeral and burial ritual.

The feedback from the families is always positive, Lawson says. She goes to a file cabinet and pulls out letters and notes from family members who found the

experience gratifying. One donor's daughter used the word "fantastic" to describe her time with the students. The woman concluded her note by writing, "I had a feeling that Mother was there."

The remains of the anatomical donors

In 2001, the college dedicated the Anatomical Donor Memorial, which now is installed along the Stanton L. Young Walkway on the Health Sciences Center's Oklahoma City campus. A project of the College of Medicine Class of 2001, the



Courtesy Hugh Crowder

The semester begins with a mutually emotional luncheon meeting between donor families and the medical student team assigned to learn from their loved one's body. The Hugh Crowder family of Ponca City wanted a group photo: back row, from left, Audrey Smith, Hugh Crowder, Aaron Murray, Michael Roberts, Jared Johnson, Benjamin Panter and Ken Crowder; front row: Dr. Muna Naash, Elisa Keefe, Cheava Jacks, Deepu Madduri, Brian McFerron and Carol Phillips.

are cremated at the end of the semester, with the final disposition of the ashes carried out according to each donor's wishes. A donor can choose to have his or her ashes scattered, buried or returned to family members.

Those who choose burial are interred in a communal grave. Lawson explains that every other year the College of Medicine, with funding provided through private donations made by the donor prior to his or her death or by the anatomical donor's family, purchases a burial site in an Oklahoma City cemetery and provides an appropriate marker with the names of the individuals whose ashes are buried there.

drive to create the memorial was launched while members of the class were first-year students enrolled in gross anatomy. The extraordinary sculpture by OU artist-in-residence Paul Moore depicts a man with skin missing from his right side, revealing the structures first-year medical students discover in human anatomy lab. The inscription on the memorial reads:

Honoring Those Who
in Death Continued to Give
by Donating Their Bodies
to Advance the Teaching
of Medical Science.