

Silent virtuous Taiwanese teachers

Steven C Lin, Julia Hsu, and Victoria Y Fan describe how a dissection course in Taiwan has inspired people to donate their bodies to science, an otherwise culturally avoided gesture in the East

Dissection is a core component of gross anatomy in medical education worldwide. Human dissection provides an opportunity to learn about the human body in three dimensions and, more recently, a chance to introduce medical students to humanistic approaches to confronting death.^{1,2}

At least two challenges exist in creating and offering a successful dissection course. The first is having sufficient numbers of people donate their bodies. In Taiwanese society, there is a belief that cadavers should not be disturbed after death.³ People have been unwilling, therefore, to donate their bodies for medical purposes that require that their bodies be handled after death, leading to cadaver shortages. The second challenge is ensuring that students treat cadavers with due respect and thereby develop humanistic values, which may prove useful in coping with stressful emotions.^{4,5}

We describe how the dissection course at Tzu Chi College of Medicine has navigated around these cultural concerns surrounding death, to

the benefit of medical students, body donors, and their families. We analyse the humanistic effects of this course on students, as well as on donors and their families, by drawing on examples of participant observation and students' reflections in Chinese language literature.⁶ We suggest that the design of this curriculum fosters accountability and offers inspiration that may have otherwise been omitted through cadaver anonymity.

Tzu Chi Foundation

Tzu Chi Foundation was created in 1966 in Taiwan by Dharma Master Cheng Yen. Tzu Chi means "compassion relief" in Chinese. Buddhist Tzu Chi General Hospital was established in 1986 to address the poor access to health care in the rural eastern coast of Taiwan. The foundation established Tzu Chi College of Medicine in 1994 to train and retain medical students for the local community.

Since receiving its first donor in 1995, Tzu Chi College of Medicine has implemented a dissection curriculum where only cadavers of voluntary,



A donor's family member and a student serve as coffin bearers, followed by Tzu Chi commissioners. Together, they accompany the donor to the cremation site

non-anonymous donors are used to teach anatomy. The course has inspired many individuals in the community to bequeath their bodies and become highly respected "great body teachers" or "silent virtuous teachers." This educational approach and cadaver donation system has resulted in an excess of donations. Today, six of the 12 medical schools in Taiwan receive cadavers from Tzu Chi College of Medicine, provided that they also abide by Tzu Chi philosophies and the same anatomy curriculum.

Dissection course and ceremonies

The anatomy course is mandatory during the third year of study and has four key features.

Firstly, it encourages reflection on issues related to confronting life and death. The main concept is that one's body can be used meaningfully after death, in this case through donation to serve as a "great body teacher" and instruct medical students who, in turn, are expected to serve and benefit society.

Secondly, the title of "great body teachers" motivates donors to take the role of highly revered teachers of future doctors. One enlisted donor spoke to a class of anatomy students one year before passing away, saying that he would allow students to make wrong incisions on his body so they can learn and prevent future errors on a live patient.

Thirdly, through reverent Buddhist rituals and reflection in the presence of donor family members, students cultivate qualities of gratitude, respect, and love that help alleviate fear, stress, anxiety, and other emotions that may arise when confronting death.

Fourthly, medical students gain experience in nurturing the doctor-patient relationship by meeting the donors' family members and, sometimes, future donors. This non-anonymous donation



Beginning the dissection class, students show their respect by bowing to the "great body teacher"



process helps foster accountability and ensures that bodies are treated with dignity.

Pre-course activities

Learning begins before the course officially commences. Students start by learning about the donors' lives through home visits to the donors' families. In rare cases, students are able to meet terminally ill donors before their death and form relationships during interviews.

Next, a memorial blessing led by Buddhist nuns is held for donor families and students. During this memorial ceremony, four medical students and the donor's family members stand on the two sides of the anatomy table where the body is placed. Under peaceful Buddhist chanting, students open the cover with humility and respect for the donors, bowing both to the body and then to the donors' family members.

Dissection course

Following the memorial ceremony, the dissection laboratory commences. The school collects pictures and stories about the donors and displays them next to the relevant anatomy table and in the hallway for students to read.

It is common for students to refer to the body as the "teacher," because each class begins with students respectfully and humbly greeting the cadaver. One student says, "Thinking back to the first class, the professor told us that we should treat every 'teaching body' on the anatomy table as our teacher. So, I have developed a habit of telling my great body teacher every day, 'Good morning, I have to trouble you again today to learn' and 'Thank you, teacher' at the beginning and end of each class."⁷

Concluding ceremonies and reflection

At the end of the semester, students carefully sew

the skin pieces back together to ensure that a whole body is available for final rites. Each student prepares a letter with their reflections, and these are presented to the donors along with a floral bouquet.

At the cremation ceremony, students, respective family members, and volunteers from Tzu Chi Foundation participate as coffin bearers for the teachers. Following cremation, final

ceremonies are held and ashes are placed in urns and kept in the Great Body Teacher Memorial Hall on Tzu Chi College of Medicine campus. It is customary in Taiwanese culture to keep ashes and urns in temples or monasteries, not in people's homes. The hall is open to the public, many of whom become inspired to be "silent virtuous teachers" of medical students.

Effects on students and donors

Medical students develop a relationship with their cadaver ("teacher") by meeting family members in person, which nurtures a sense of responsibility and compassion within students. One student reflected thus on the student-donor-family relationship: "When family members came to see their deceased relatives, [I] realised that we were dealing with not just a teaching tool. A tool is lifeless and has no feelings; but teaching bodies are different . . . when we cut into the body of a donor, the cut also reaches the heart of his family member. It is the hope that we can benefit and learn from all this that comforts the donor's family."⁸

Moreover, after developing relationships with students and participating in the pre-dissection memorial ceremony, donors' families are more assured that bodies are treated with dignity.

The actual dissection course lets students connect their "teachers" to their biographical profile, which rests at the dissection table to serve as a constant reminder of the underlying human story. This custom also promotes mindfulness of the teacher's life experiences that may manifest physically. Meeting donors and learning about their lives fosters humanistic values in students, such as gratitude and respect in light of the donors' selfless giving.

Death and confronting death may at times be emotionally and psychologically challenging for

medical students; however, fostering compassion toward donors and their families might help students cope more effectively.

Letter writing allows students to direct private and reflective thoughts towards their teachers. In one letter for the concluding ceremony, a student wrote: "Learning about you reveals your personality, making us feel closer to you. We feel as if we have become a part of your past life, sharing the same sorrows and joys, as if we are family members and friends, too."⁸

The concluding burial ceremony provides an additional opportunity for students to interact with donors' families. This event enables donor families and students to support each other in the mourning process, but with mutual respect, gratitude, and humility.

Conclusions

Although quantitative assessment of this approach to human dissection has not been conducted, the overall impressions from student and donor family reflections are positive: many students develop a deeper sense of respect for themselves, other students, and the cadavers. Students cultivate and integrate humanistic values into their training through positive interactions with donors and their families, by learning the human story of their "teachers," and by taking part in culturally appropriate ceremonies. These aspects could be incorporated into dissection courses at other medical schools in different countries, although the mechanisms and success of such changes will differ depending on cultural context.

Furthermore, prospective donors are well acquainted with, if not inspired by, the educational approach and teaching process at Tzu Chi College of Medicine, which suggests that information about cadaver use could increase donations.

This paper adds to existing literature on implementation of dissection laboratories in an Asian Buddhist context, the most prominent example being in Thailand.⁹ Future research may study the long term effects of humanism on quality of patient care and on the feasibility of cross cultural adoption of aspects of this anatomy curriculum.

Links

- Tzu Chi Foundation (www.tzuchi.org)
- Tzu Chi University (<http://eng.tcu.edu.tw>)
- Buddhist Tzu Chi General Hospital (www.tzuchi.com.tw/tzuchi_en/)

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