Journal of Morphological Sciences
J Morphol Sci
Brazilian Society of Anatomy

Editorial
J Morphol Sci 2025;42:1

The Silence of the Ancestral Art of Dissection

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In the silence of an anatomy room, the murmurs of students once echoed between the white-tiled walls. Metal tables gleamed in the cold light, and the air carried a pungent aroma of formaldehyde. Here, where science met mortality, future doctors faced the harsh reality of human existence, unraveling the intricate skeleton of life. But such a sight is becoming rare in Brazil, as the practice of dissecting cadavers in medical schools slowly gives way to plastic dummies and digital models.

Let us examine our actual national situation: Brazil has more than 390 medical schools, offering 37,303 students spots spread across its vast territory. Among the states with the highest number of admissions are São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Bahia, Rio de Janeiro and Paraná. In these regions, large groups of students begin their medical careers without the opportunity for their first tangible contact with a human body, a gesture loaded with symbolism and essential to the complete training of a doctor. The lack of dissection practice on real cadavers prevents these students from facing the challenges and achieving the excellence that this unique experience provides.

The replacement of cadavers with artificial models casts a shadow over the pedagogy of medicine. While the touch of a scalpel on the epidermis of a real body reveals the complexity of the layers of living tissue, the virtual or plastic scalpel lacks the challenge and unpredictability that nature provides. Synthetic molds do not bleed, do not wear out over time, do not bear witness to the history of past illnesses — they are, in short, too static and too perfect, lacking any approximation to human diversity.

However, the lack of cadavers is not simply a matter of academic preference, but also of financial resources. Public universities, already suffocated by budgetary constraints, find themselves unable to bear the significant costs of maintaining a body pool. The preparation, storage, and ethical care required make each body a considerable investment, justifying, in part, the transition to more affordable and sustainable alternatives.

However, the impact of this shift goes beyond mere technical skills. The experience of working with cadavers not only strengthens the motor skills essential for surgical practice but also fosters a deep ethical discipline. Respect for the human body, empathy, and consideration for the dignity of others are invaluable lessons, carved into the hearts of future physicians as they meticulously unravel each system and organ.

Imagine a student who, without this training, encounters a patient in a coma for the first time. It is at this point that the lack of this initial experience becomes evident. The ability to work with care and skill, the ability to handle uncertainty and show respect for the most vulnerable moments of human life, all these skills are homed in the dissection room.

By replacing cadavers with synthetic alternatives, we not only deprive students of the opportunity to closely observe naturally occurring anatomical variations, but we also deprive them of essential hands-on learning. For the surgeon of tomorrow, who may be operating on any of us or our loved ones, the lack of this early training can make a difference in judgment and accuracy.

While many embrace the inevitability of technology in health education, we must question whether this is a trade-off we are prepared to accept without reservation. The corpse may be inert, but it is loaded with lessons; its replacement should not be a decision made without careful consideration of the long-term implications.

Ultimately, it's not just a matter of technique, but of character development, of ingraining the visceral fascination of reality in the hearts of those who will soon be on the front lines of human health. The practice of dissection, though diminishing, remains an invaluable milestone in medical education—irreplaceable, by its very nature.

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DOI: 10.51929/jms.42.1.2025
ISSN 2177-0298