Reducing Anxiety Before the Initial Dissection

Helping Students Get to Know Each Other
Physical therapy students enter the program as a cohort taking classes together throughout the two-year curriculum. During fall orientation students are introduced to the faculty and to each other. So that they can quickly get to know each other, they are asked to write and share a biographical sketch. They are then given three weeks to choose dissecting partners before they begin dissecting.

Introducing Students to the Anatomy Lab
During the first anatomy class the students are given a tour of the anatomy suite to familiarize them with the surroundings. While students are in the lab for the initial visit, the metal covers on the dissecting tables remain closed. Thus, students see the lab but do not yet see the cadavers.

Touring the Anatomy Lab before beginning dissection.

Students Talk About Their Experiences in the Lab
We produced a video in which we interviewed six first-year physical therapy students one month after they began dissecting. They were asked to describe their expectations prior to entering the lab and whether those expectations were met once they began dissecting. They also provided advice for incoming students about dealing with the anxieties of working with cadavers. We plan to show the video to new students next fall as part of their orientation.

Respect for the Body Donors

Developing the Proper Attitude
Students are assigned to one cadaver for the entire two-semester course. To remind students that the cadavers were once real people, they are given the body donor’s first name, age, and a brief statement on the cause of death. Lab policies prohibit loud music, profanity, or disrespectful behavior while dissecting.

Appropriate Draping and Care of the Body
Respect for the body donors is reflected in how the cadavers are dissecting and culminates with a memorial program to honor the body donors. This poster presentation provides the ways in which students are prepared for their first cadaver dissections and how they are encouraged to respect the human body throughout the anatomy course.

Discussing the Cadaver Experience with Nursing Students
At various times throughout the fall semester of 2002 senior nursing students enrolled in a course on death and dying came into the cadaver lab to view the dissections and to talk with physical therapy students about working with a human body. Students from both disciplines had an opportunity to discuss psychosocial and spiritual aspects of the experience. Both nursing and physical therapy students found this to be a rewarding experience.

Memorializing the Body Donors
In the spring of the second semester each dissection group develops a presentation to honor their body donor. Students make their presentations during a memorial program held in a park adjacent to the classroom building. Faculty, students, and administrators attend the ceremony. Examples of past student presentations include original poems, personal letters of gratitude, a candle-lighting ceremony, release of balloons, tree planting, recitation of a short story, and musical interpretations.

Let Us Not Forget
Let us not forget you are someone’s child someone’s parent someone’s love someone’s friend. And you touched many lives in your time. No doubt you changed a life. You changed my life. I am sure you could not have dreamt you would have had such an impact on the lives of others. And you touched many lives in your time. No doubt you changed a life. You changed my life. I am sure you could not have dreamt you would have had such an impact on the lives of others.

Memorial Poem Written by a Student

A Student Centered Approach
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Cadaver dissections are the cornerstone of the anatomy curriculum in the physical therapy program at Western Carolina University. New students who have never worked with cadavers may experience great stress or even emotional trauma when they first begin dissecting. To reduce anxiety students are carefully prepared for their first encounter with cadavers. Steps in preparation create opportunities for students to reflect on and discuss these anxieties. Using cadavers can also provide opportunities for students to develop a respect for the human body. In our anatomy lab this respect is reflected in how the students identify with the cadavers they are dissecting and culminates with a memorial program to honor the body donors. This poster presentation provides the ways in which students are prepared for their first cadaver dissections and how they are encouraged to respect the human body throughout the anatomy course.