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Gross anatomy at Catholic school teaches sacred, profane

Those who donate their bodies keep giving after death

By Manya A. Brachear, Tribune reporter

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Every year, first-year medical students grapple with gross anatomy, approaching their first human dissection with a mixture of anticipation, anxiety or sheer dread.

On Monday, 150 students at Loyola University Chicago's Strich School of Medicine approached their task with reverence, reciting prayers and bowing their heads as a Roman Catholic priest offered a blessing over the 18 shrouded cadavers — silent teachers who would guide the aspiring physicians' careers.

"The cadaver keeps speaking to you even in death," said Michael Dausvardis, director of the anatomy course. "You've got to listen to it. There are volumes of knowledge you can still learn from that person who made that ultimate gift."

During the ceremony, Salvation Army Maj. Debbie Sjogren, of Lombard, stepped up and addressed the students. Her late husband, Salvation Army Maj. Randall Sjogren, was likely under one of those sheets, she said, because he wanted to be one of the next generation's first patients.

"My husband's prayer was: 'I've always wanted my life to bring glory to God. Now I want my death to,'" Debbie Sjogren recounted. "He prayed for every medical student that learns from his body and every patient of theirs that heals from the knowledge they receive."

After Randall Sjogren died at age 57 in March, his entire family agreed to donate their bodies to medical education. Sjogren had donated his body to Loyola through the Anatomical Gift Association of Illinois, a clearinghouse for corpses donated for the purpose of education and research.

Since its creation in 1918 by a group of schools that believed human dissections were central to an aspiring doctor's training, the organization has prepared, stored and distributed more than 40,000 cadavers to train about 70,000 medical students statewide. The association also handles the subsequent cremation and delivers the ashes to the families.



Cadaver dedication

(Scott Strazzante, Chicago Tribune / August 29, 2011)

Medical students Clifford Hecht, left, Alissa Hart and Mike Henry peek at their cadaver after a dedication and blessing ceremony held to honor those who have donated their bodies for medical education at Loyola University's Strich School of Medicine in Maywood

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Potter's field burial not so lonely after all

By NEIL STEINBERG

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A boxy U-Haul truck wends its way slowly along the curving roadway of Homewood Memorial Gardens, to a group waiting by a large, shallow hole in a section of the cemetery known as The Garden of the Good Samaritan No. 11. The sun is bright, the sky blue, a pleasant day for November.

The truck backs up to the lip of the hole. The rear door opens to reveal 24 plywood coffins. A corrugated metal ramp is run from the truck into the pit.

A smell rolls out that I've come to think of as "refrigerated death," a queasy blend of meat and bleach. The bodies are fresh from the Cook County Medical Examiner's office on Harrison.

Last month I wrote a column contrasting the dignified ceremony that Loyola conducts for its medical school cadavers, complete with poems, prayers and priests, with what I imagined to be the lonely burial at potter's field: "the sack shrouded body is tossed into a pit with a minimum of fuss."

Even as I typed those words, it struck me: I had overstepped what I actually knew and launched into speculation — dangerous for a journalist — and if I was going to comment on this, I had better go see what I was talking about.

The burials are conducted monthly. These two dozen bodies had arrived at the morgue in July, and their relatives either couldn't be found or refused to pay for a funeral. The medical examiner, Dr. Nancy Jones, wants to donate such unclaimed bodies to science, both to fill the shortage of medical cadavers and save the county the \$289 per coffin paid to Homewood. But there was a public outcry, and such donations have been temporarily suspended while she re-evaluates the procedures.

The hole is shallow, about 3 feet. Homewood is built upon stone; anything deeper must be jackhammered out of rock. Illinois law requires only 18 inches of earth over a coffin; to comply, the soil is mounded on graves.

Four gravediggers — Adam Springer, Michael Scott, Gregory Blackshire and Eli Martinez, who wears a kerchief over his face to ward off the smell — muscle the pine boxes down the ramp, aided by four students from the Worsham College of Mortuary Science, in Wheeling — Chris Nelson, Nikkia Brown, Addie Cassidy and Darrell Randolph, who wears a nice suit for this dirty job, which earns them extra credit. Some of the coffins are very heavy — corpses are fatter nowadays. The coffins in the truck are leaking.

"We do wash it out and bleach it," says Homewood's Kelly McCarthy.

The pine boxes squeak, dragged against each other, then rumble down the ramp, splintering as they go. As each is pulled off the truck, a number is read off a small round brass tag.

“Two ninety-five, got it,” says McCarthy. “Oh yeah, he’s a heavy one,” grunts Scott. “He’s a biggie.”

In 30 minutes the work is done. The grave diggers, the students, McCarthy, plus someone from the ME’s office, sent to keep an eye on things, gather by the grave containing the remains of 20 men and four women.

Tim Kowalski, who teaches at Worsham, reads from a black binder.

“Bless me God,” he begins, then recites the 23rd Psalm: “I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . . ”

“We commend to God the souls of these individuals whose mortal remains lie before us and to commit their bodies to the earth . . . ,” he continues. “We did not know these people. Many things about them will remain always a mystery to us. We do not know what were the circumstances of their lives Many may have died in poverty. Others might have simply outlived their families. Our beginnings do not know our ends. . . . We do not know any of these things, but one thing we do know, they were human beings, and at the end of their lives they deserve to be treated with respect. Our common humanity demands that these lives should not pass from the earth unremembered.”

He asks for a moment of silence and, as if on cue, birds chirp. The 24 names and numbers are read aloud. Then we who are not dead return to our lives on this crisp, bright autumn day while the backhoe does its work.

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A place for your body when you're done with it

By NEIL STEINBERG

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A human brain is heavy — averaging about three pounds, which is a good thing when you are alive and doing taxes or composing poetry or any other complicated, thought-intensive task.

When you are dead, however, and your brain is being stored in a white plastic bucket on a metal shelf at the Anatomical Gift Association of Illinois, 1540 S. Ashland, that weight becomes a disadvantage. If simply plopped into diluted formaldehyde, a brain sinks, and over time will flatten out against the bottom of the bucket, distorting itself, compressing, making study difficult.

Thus the brains are put into plastic bags and floated in saline solution.

The reason the brains are removed in the first place is because your brain is the first organ to decompose after death, along with your intestines, which is not an issue in the few days a body spends above ground before a typical burial.

But corpses donated to science are around for a long time — a year, even two. They need a serious dose of embalming fluid, chemicals introduced through the large veins in the thigh, and even then the process can take a week, and the brain, way up in the head, might not be sufficiently treated. Thus brains are removed and preserved separately.

Some 100,000 Illinois residents died in 2010. Of that number, 483 — less than 1/2 of 1 percent — donated their bodies to science last year, a testimony to the power of religious faith, emotion and habit.

These donations were brought by funeral homes and medical examiners to the Anatomical Gift Association, a nondescript low brick building tucked between train viaducts, just north of St. Adalbert Church.

The AGA was founded in 1918 by the medical schools at the University of Illinois, Loyola and Rush.

“Over the years, every medical school in the state joined the association,” said Paul J. Dudek, executive vice president of the AGA. “Northwestern, University of Chicago, Chicago Osteopathic, which is now Midwestern University, Southern Illinois, Chicago Medical School at Rosalind Franklin.”

A lot of schools, a lot of students, each requiring a cadaver to properly learn the brain-boggling complexity of the human body. Nor is the need limited to anatomy classes.

“We also support a number of other institutions . . . [and] a number of research programs — Alzheimer’s research, orthopedic training, and smaller programs: trying to develop artificial discs for the

spine and breast reconstruction research,” said Dudek. “For the last couple of years we have provided cadavers to Rush Medical School’s Emergency Medicine Department. They received a grant from the Department of Defense to train Army medics and Navy and Marine corpsmen in advance trauma medicine — how to do open heart massages, insert chest tubes, do tracheotomies, the whole nine yards.”

Important stuff. Yet donations are off.

“This year we’re running about 10 percent behind,” said Dudek. “I honestly don’t know why.” In the 1980s, the AGA some years got 700 donations a year.

The facility, housing 127 cadavers that day, with two being embalmed, was immaculate. Cleanliness must be important, I said.

“Very much so,” said Jasmyn DuBois, 36, who has worked as resident embalmer at the AGA for the past four years.

“I love it,” said the self-described military brat who “grew up everywhere.”

What about the job does she love?

“I love the scientific side of it,” she said. “I enjoy the fact that these are people who have donated themselves for the advancement of science and for saving lives. Personally, I think there is a lot less grief involved than a regular funeral. The families can take some comfort in the fact that their loved one is going to be helping future generations.”

Yet 99.5 percent don’t donate our bodies.

“It’s just a fact that we as an American society have pushed death away from our everyday lives, and shoved it into nursing homes, so people don’t see the process of death,” she said. “Not very many people want to think about death.”

I sure don’t. Even after my morning at the AGA, and as much as I sincerely believe donating your body to science is the nobler, not to mention cheaper, route, far superior to being buried in the ground to decompose, still some deep emotional block — thousands of years of cultural tradition perhaps — stands in the way of committing to do something so obviously beneficial to the world. So far. Hopefully, I’ll have time enough so my heavy brain can change its mind about that one.

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