

Paying Respect to the Silent Mentors: A Sri Lankan Experience

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Donation of bodies is one of the foremost methods of obtaining cadavers for dissection laboratories. Thanksgiving and memorial services are held by many anatomy institutions and medical schools worldwide, for the donors who selflessly bequeathed their bodies for medical education. In this article, an institutional experience of conducting a memorial service in the form of a Buddhist ceremony to invoke blessings to the donors and their families at the Faculty of Medical Sciences of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura in Sri Lanka, for over 25 years, is presented by the authors. The bodies are donated to the medical faculty with informed written consent taken from the donors prior to their deaths. This process is entirely a voluntary service of goodwill towards medical education by the donors, as no financial compensation is provided by the university to them or to their families. Additionally, the benefits of holding such a memorial ceremony for the students as well as for the family members of the deceased are discussed.

Keywords: Gross Anatomy Education, Medical Education, Cadaver dissection, Body donation, Memorial services, Sri Lanka

Introduction

The dissection of donated bodies for the study of clinical anatomy is a cornerstone of medical education (Pawlina *et al.*, 2011). From the days of the ancient Greek physician Herophilus, who first systematically dissected a human body in the 3rd century BC, the practice of dissection has a long course throughout history (Elizondo-Omaña *et al.*, 2005). At times vilified as an unethical and immoral practice by legal and religious authorities, it made its way back to medical education and is now regarded as an indispensable tool in the medical curriculum. Although technical innovations have provided alternative means for teaching clinical anatomy, there is general consensus that none of those technologies can replace the dissection of donated bodies but only supplement and complement the dissections.

The sources of acquisition of cadavers for dissection have varied throughout history. The earliest dissections were done on bodies of executed criminals including those who were hanged or sent to the gallows (Mavrodi *et al.*, 2013). Unclaimed bodies from hospitals, poorhouses, and prisons also found their way onto the dissection tables of anatomists (Hildebrandt, 2008). When the demand exceeded the supply, some even resorted to grave robbing and murder to obtain bodies to sell to those who required them (Grendler, 2002, Humphries, 2014). However, when these gruesome practices came to light, the practice of dissection soon fell out of favor with the public. Over time, with the development of laws and ethical guidelines, such practices were frowned upon.

Countries with a Buddhist majority such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Japan rely exclusively on body donation (Subasinghe & Jones, 2015). The impact of religion on body donation programs has been identified by research focusing on factors that influence individuals to donate their bodies for the progress of medicine (Habicht *et al.*, 2018). The Sri Lankan population, shaped by the

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Buddhist way of thinking has embraced these programs of body donations. According to Theravada Buddhism, practiced in Sri Lanka, charity, or donation (*dana*) is a highly meritorious deed that needs to be practiced consistently on the path to achieving spiritual enlightenment (Simpson, 2004). Therefore, any opportunity to donate to a person or cause is received as a blessing in itself to practice *dana*. In other countries including India that conduct body donation programs, it has been observed that the primary motivation for donation was altruism (Rokade & Gaikwad, 2012). The principal objective of this paper is to provide a detailed exploration of the body donation program and the way donors are honored and respected at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and to draw parallels to those carried out at other medical schools across the world.

Paying Respect to the “Silent Mentors”

The medical education in Sri Lanka can be traced back to the 19th century. Mission Medical School in Manipay (a small village 10km from Jaffna) was the first formally established medical school, followed by the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo (formerly University of Ceylon) in 1870 (Kumanan & Sreeharan, 2021). The Faculty of Medical Sciences (FMS) of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura (USJ), Sri Lanka is a relatively young medical school with its' inception in 1993 and located in the administrative capital of the country (FMS, 2023). Over the past 30 years, it has grown to become one of the leading providers of medical education in the country.

Clinical anatomy education during the first two years of the medical curriculum is carried out in a hybrid manner, combining both dissections of body donors as well as technological aides. At the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, multiple methods are used for teaching and learning Anatomy, including cadaveric dissections, use of prosected specimens, supplemented with lectures on anatomy and histology, self-study of the recommended anatomy textbooks, tutorials, and technical aids like the “human anatomy visual atlas” software and an ultrasound scans to

demonstrate radiological anatomy. Additionally, written examinations and spot tests that require identification of structures in the prosected specimens are employed for assessment (Edirisinghe et al., 2022). A human body is assigned to a group of medical students at the start of the first year and will be utilized to study clinical anatomy under the supervision of the lecturers. Proper dissection methods are demonstrated to the students, and they are instructed to carry out dissections and engage in self-study.

In Sri Lanka, donors who wish to donate their bodies to the medical faculty do so by completing a written informed consent sheet in accordance with the Transplantation of Human Tissue Act of 1987 (Laws of Sri Lanka, 1987). The family of the donors are sent a letter of thanks for their valuable contribution. Sixteen to twenty such donations are utilized to teach medical students usually comprising of around 160 - 200 students per batch. A registry is maintained by the Department of Anatomy to record the demographic details of the body donors. Gender distribution has shown variation over the years (e.g., in 2019, 60% were females, while in 2022, it was 29%). However, the average age of donors consistently fell within the sixth decade of life. The majority (95%) of donors belonged to the Buddhists, while the remaining donors identified as Hindus or Christians, with no representation from the Muslim community.

Once the dissections are completed on a body, the bones are harvested by the Department of Anatomy while the soft tissue is buried in a designated burial ground.

The FMS, USJ has a longstanding custom of honoring the body donors to the faculty. This is done in accordance with Buddhist religious traditions and is organized by the Buddhist Society of the Faculty which is made up of the student body as well as faculty advisors. An overnight ‘*pirith*’ (verses and scriptures) chanting ceremony followed by an almsgiving the next morning is conducted annually to invoke

blessings for the donors and show gratitude for their good deeds.

First-year students take leadership in the organization of this ceremony under the guidance

of the faculty advisors. Preparations begin a few weeks prior with the decoration of the premises with religious decor, Buddhist flags, and a “pandol” (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A pandol with religious and cultural symbols erected at the entrance to the medical faculty

The pandol holds significance as it is a unique creation exclusively designed and constructed by the students. It is made to stand at the entrance of the faculty, constructed utilizing wooden stilts, boards and other materials and is taken down once the memorial ceremonies are over. Each year, students endeavor to build an innovative pandol with biodegradable materials. The structure features artistic paintings by the students, and is remarkable in being a collaborative effort of numerous students all while expressing their creativity. It is worth noting that students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds come together to lend their support.

Students also collect donations from their families, neighbors and well-wishers so that others too can take part in a meritorious act by providing financial assistance. Buddhist priests are invited to perform the religious proceedings

and the entire faculty, relatives of the body donors and well-wishers too are invited to participate.

The ceremony begins in the late evening with a grand procession escorting the other Relics of Lord Buddha and priests from their temple to the faculty premises (Figure 2) amidst students bearing flags and other religious insignia.

The priests are then invited to be seated on a specially created dais (pirith mandapaya) (Figure 3) from where they begin the religious rituals. The chanting ceremony is attended by students, faculty, relatives of the deceased donors and well-wishers. The chanting of pirith is considered to provide merit to the donors in their afterlife such that they may be reborn in a better life and ultimately achieve ‘nirvana’ (enlightenment). The ceremony continues into the following morning, at the end of which an almsgiving (Figure 4) is conducted in honor of the donors. Here, food and

'pirikara' (religious offerings) are offered to the priests while all the attendees are invited to partake of the food as well. At the end of this

ceremony, the priests are respectfully escorted back to their residing temple.



Figure 2. The other Relics of Lord Buddha (Covered with a glowing Pink and yellow cloth) brought to the faculty premises with a grand procession to escort the Buddhist priests



Figure 3 - Buddhist monks seated around the other relics of Lord Buddha (covered with a glowing pink and yellow cloth) and chanting Pirith while students, relatives of body donors, and well-wishers listen to the overnight Pirith (at the background). The two pots covered with white cloth are filled with Pirith water (similar to holy water) water that has been blessed by overnight chanting of Pirith.



Figure 4. Paying respect according to Buddhist traditions by conducting an almsgiving on the following morning and presenting alms to the monks by staff, students, relatives of body donors and well-wishers

Practices in other Medical Schools

The first cadaver memorial ceremony is reported to have been held in England in 1965, with American medical schools adopting the practice in the 1970s (Pawlina *et al.*, 2011). A survey carried out in 2012 among human anatomy programs in the United States revealed that out of the total respondents, 99.5% hold memorial ceremonies which are usually organized by students and are secular in nature (Jones *et al.*, 2014). Similar ceremonies are organized at a majority of the anatomical institutes in Germany and Austria, with emphasis on the religious aspect of paying respects (Ghosh, 2017). The students in these countries also preferred maintaining the anonymity of both the donor identity and their personal lives, as it currently stands (Hasselblatt *et al.*, 2018). However in Taiwan, as part of the silent mentor program, students are shown photographs of the donors during their lifetime and encouraged to connect

with the donor's family, learn about their life experiences, and participate in a memorial service where the body is respectfully prepared and placed in a coffin (Douglas-Jones, 2017). Thanksgiving ceremonies have also been documented in several other countries including New Zealand, Switzerland, Brazil, Taiwan, and China (Riederer and Bueno-López, 2014, Milnes, 2017). These ceremonies include musical performances, speeches, written essays and poetry, religious observances, presentations by lecturers and students, and meetings with the families of donors (Riederer & Bueno-López, 2014, Milnes, 2017). Certain universities, particularly those in North America, utilize YouTube to release videos showcasing commemoration ceremonies conducted for body donors, which serve the purpose of educating the public about these practices and also provide an opportunity for colleagues from countries where such practices are not implemented to learn and gain knowledge.

A ceremony similar to the ones conducted by the Sri Lankan medical faculties is held by medical schools in Thailand, another predominantly Buddhist country. However, it includes the cremation of the donor bodies in addition to the various religious rites carried out to transfer merit to the donors in their afterlife (Winkelmann & Güldner, 2004). Apart from such memorial ceremonies, some institutes have built monuments in honor of the donors to which students, faculty and family members can pay their respects (Riederer & Bueno-López, 2014). In 2009, a monument was unveiled by the Department of Anatomy at the Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre (RUNMC) in the Netherlands (Kooloos et al., 2010). The “Forest of Life” (Vitae Silva), a monument in commemoration of the donors, was installed by the University of the Basque Country, Spain to provide a final resting place for the remains of the donors (Riederer & Bueno-López, 2014).

Despite the finding that students’ attitudes towards the commemoration of body donors are unaffected by religion and ethnicity, it is recommended to enhance the inclusivity of diverse cultures in such practices (Strkalj et al., 2021). Here at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, the “pirith” ceremony serves as a good example, as it is actively organized and attended by students from all cultures. Additionally, small-scale prayers are held to accommodate the religious beliefs of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. In Sri Lanka the number of non-Buddhist donations is very low, however, even such bodies are treated as if they are Buddhist and given due respect (Simpson, 2019).

Significance of Memorial Services

The International Federation of Associations of Anatomists recommends that institutions should be encouraged to hold thanksgiving services for body donors. This recommendation itself highlights the importance of memorial services as described above. These ceremonies have a significant impact on students, relatives of the deceased donors as well as medicine and science in general.

Students who are involved in memorial ceremonies derive much benefit in terms of educational, professional, psychological, spiritual, and social aspects (Lai et al., 2019). When held at the commencement of the dissection course, it has been found that memorial services serve to reduce negative emotions regarding cadavers among medical students. They were more likely to have greater commitment to their studies as well (Guo et al., 2020). The experiences also facilitated the students to view their future patients and their family members in a different light, improving the quality of their doctor-patient relationships (Guo et al., 2020). Students were able to appreciate the magnitude of the generosity of the donors and their family members and this forms the basis for their future relationships with patients during their medical school career (Ghosh, 2017), thus avoiding emotional detachment in the anatomy laboratory and incorporating humanity instead (Champney, 2019). Memorial ceremonies also foster ethical behavior with respect to the donors which is an essential component of medical education (Guo et al., 2020).

The dissection course is a challenging experience for any medical student and can evoke a range of emotions that are dictated by religious beliefs, personal experiences, and socio-cultural attitudes toward dissection (Elansary et al., 2009). By holding a memorial service, students can reconcile these emotions with the importance of dissection for medical education and show their gratitude to those who willingly donated their bodies for the betterment of society (Pawlina et al., 2011, Subasinghe & Jones, 2015). Qualities such as empathy, compassion, and respect are also best nurtured in future doctors by hands-on experiences (da Rocha et al., 2020). It further helps provide closure to an emotionally intense experience and helps develop a better understanding of life and death (Guo et al., 2020; Pawlina et al., 2011). During the process of organizing these activities, students invariably develop good interpersonal and social skills. It also promotes unity among students from different religious, cultural, and social backgrounds (Subasinghe & Jones, 2015).

Memorial ceremonies are also a significant experience for the relatives of the body donors since they do not get to hold a funeral for their loved ones or carry out any religious rituals (Gürses *et al.*, 2019). These memorials provide an ideal opportunity for them to pay respect to their deceased family members and leave with positive memories (Subasinghe & Jones, 2015). Participating in these ceremonies can also encourage the attendees including medical students to consider becoming a future donor by allowing them to experience the value of such contributions (Guo *et al.*, 2020; Subasinghe & Jones, 2015).

Discussion

This article presents an institutional experience of conducting a memorial service in the form of a Buddhist ceremony to pay respect to body donors at the Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura. The authors highlighted the importance of body donation for medical education and emphasize the ethical and voluntary nature of it, while exploring the benefits of such a ceremony for both students and families of the deceased.

The dissection of bodies for the study of clinical anatomy in medical education has a long history (Elizondo-Omaña *et al.*, 2005). Cadaveric dissection remains an indispensable tool for students, despite technological advancements providing alternative teaching methods (Biasutto *et al.*, 2006). The sources of bodies for dissection have evolved, from the use of executed criminals (Mavrodi *et al.*, 2013) and unclaimed bodies (Hildebrandt, 2008) to body donation programs, which is considered the most ethical approach in many countries (Riederer, 2016). Sri Lanka is one of the countries that relies exclusively on body donation, influenced by Buddhist beliefs and the practice of charity (*dana*) (Subasinghe & Jones, 2015).

The article illustrates the longstanding tradition of honoring body donors at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura by way of a Buddhist memorial ceremony organized by the student body and

faculty advisors. The ceremony comprises of an overnight chanting of verses and scriptures (pirith) followed by an almsgiving the next morning. Students take leadership in construction of a pandol (decorated structure) and the collection of donations. The ceremony aims to invoke blessings and express gratitude for the selfless contribution of the donors. It also serves as an opportunity for students, faculty, relatives of the donor, and well-wishers to come together and participate in a meritorious act.

In summary this article highlights the significance of body donation for medical education (Biasutto *et al.*, 2006, Zhang *et al.*, 2008) and the ethical and voluntary nature of the practice in Sri Lanka. The authors provide insight into the specific practices and traditions followed at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Apart from paying respect to the body donors, the ceremony helps bring together the medical community and donor families, fostering a sense of gratitude and appreciation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the practice of body donation for medical education is highly valued and respected in Sri Lanka. The donation of bodies by individuals, guided by the principles of Theravada Buddhism and altruism, has provided an invaluable resource for medical education. The university, in collaboration with students, staff, and Buddhist priests, organizes an annual memorial service to honor and show gratitude to the body donors. This ceremony, which involves overnight chanting of verses and almsgiving, shows deep respect and appreciation for the donors' selfless contribution. Such practices are not exclusive to Sri Lanka but are also observed in medical schools worldwide, emphasizing the importance of honoring those who have generously donated their bodies for the advancement of medical education. These ceremonies serve as a reminder of the profound impact and lasting legacy left by the "Silent Mentors" who continue to inspire and educate future healthcare professionals.

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