

1. Introduction to “History and ethics of anatomical dissection”

Sabine Hildebrandt 4/1/14

Anatomy provides knowledge of the structure and function of the human body, knowledge gained by dissection. In the last decades anatomy has also become “a vehicle for moral and ethical education” in the perception of students of anatomy (Dyer and Thorndyke, 2000). One of the aims of the dissection course has become the reflection on ethical questions surrounding the dignity of the human body in life and death. In order to understand the ethical implications of the medical discipline of anatomy the study of the history of anatomical dissection can provide relevant insights.

Important questions in anatomy are:

1. Why do anatomists need to dissect? Do they?
2. Where do the bodies come from?
3. Do dead bodies deserve respect?
4. How do dissectors save their humanity?

The following aspects of the history and ethics of anatomy and anatomical dissection need to be addressed:

- Alexandrian medicine 300 BC:
the first breaking of the “taboo of violating a dead persons body”:
the claim of anatomical dissection being the only true means of gaining knowledge in anatomy
- scientific anatomy since the renaissance
questions of body procurement, laws and ethics
- William Hunter
the need for clinical detachment
- discriminatory practices in anatomy
the US in the 19th century, NS Germany: respect for the dead body
- global practices in modern anatomical education
- ethical issues in current anatomy

Recommended reading:

Christine Montross: Body of work, Meditations on mortality from the human anatomy lab. The Penguin Press, New York, 2007

Dyer GS, Thorndike ME. 2000. Quidne mortui vivos docent? The evolving purpose of

human dissection in medical education. *Acad Med* 75:969–979.