

Department of Ethics, Medical University of Lublin

JAROSŁAW SAK, BEATA KOŁODZIEJCZYK, PAWEŁ KICIŃSKI

*The status of human body with regard to corpse preparation.
The analysis of final year medical students' opinions*

The problem of human body is the issue invariably bothering the mankind. The attitude to corporal matters depends on various factors, including religion (5), culture, psychology or other factors connected with the progress of medical science. The psychoanalytical stream stresses and absolutizes the cultural bodily symbols (1). In medicine, the human body is given the reality of a subject of medical operations, especially during surgical activities (9). It does not, however, naturally follow that the contemporary medicine approaches the human body in separation from the natural environment, biosphere or even interpersonal relations. An example of holistic approach to human body is the biopsychosocial model (3). The problem of the status of human body is a significant area pursued also within the research of philosophical anthropology (11). The image of 'bodiness' present in the social awareness changed over centuries. Its comprehension within a given historical period, and also in the present day, requires the social attitude towards human corpse after death to be taken into consideration. The unsolved question remains, namely whether the body after death becomes an object or it bears the imprint of a living human. This issue plays a crucial role in medicine where contact with corpses is frequently an everyday routine. After death, the human body turns into a repository of organs to be used for transplantation, and also the object of scientific research and material for anatomy classes. Corpse preparation during anatomy classes is typically the first experience of medical students of the dead human and evokes the reflection over the posthumous status of our body. Our intention was to examine the status of human body in students' opinion. We intended to verify what reflections the students are faced with as a result of learning on the human body when looking back at the entire period of medical studies. The medical literature offers approaches underlining the significance of the contact with corpses during anatomy classes for the formation of later doctor/patient relationship (10). Also for this reason, when attempting to preliminarily verify this opinion, we selected for the research a group of the final year students just about to enter the professional path.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was performed on a group of the final year medical students: the 6th year of Medical Faculty and 5th year of Dentistry Division of the Medical University of Lublin during the summer term of the 2004/2005 academic year. The surveyed group totalled 216 persons.

The study was done on the basis of a self-developed questionnaire, referring to the seven-level Likert scale, with the answer variants given. Likert scale used in the survey was a seven-level scale of the following characteristics: 7 – Strongly agree, 6 – Agree, 5 – Rather agree, 4 – Neither agree nor disagree – I have no opinion, 3 – Rather disagree, 2 – Disagree, 1 – Strongly disagree. We asked the respondents of what, in their opinion, the corpse preparation during anatomy classes is connected with.

RESULTS

The degree of conformity of the given answer variants to the question of what the corpse preparation during anatomy classes is connected with is outlined on the charts below.

DISCUSSION

When looking closer at the opinions of the final year medical students (medicine and dentistry), we concluded that they are highly aware of the usefulness of the human body for the scientific cognition and the implication of this cognition for the therapeutic purposes of medicine.

The surveyed students do not regard the corpse preparation as opposing their religious beliefs (Fig. 1). It must be noted that from among the surveyed group, 96% of students were declared as believers. It is worth stressing that the contemporary stand of the Roman Catholic Church on the issue of autopsy for scientific and didactic purposes does not imply any such contradiction. The dogma of human resurrection and future eternal life does not presuppose the resurrection of the body as the human body, but – according to St Paul – the resurrection of persons, and not in order to return to ‘bodiness’ but rather to other kind of life, the life similar to that of the risen Christ (8). When considering the Catholic personalist approach, the question of ‘am I the person because I have body, or rather because I have reason’, is answered by Gogacz who says that possessing the body does not make a person: ‘If body made a given being a person, then the ontic status of a person would have to be granted also to animals and even to plants. [...] the condition and the carrier of the right to constitute a person is the spiritual being, that is, the being independent on the present matter as individualizing the substance of ability.’(4). The Polish Catholic personalists underline the spiritual values and obligations of the individual and recommend, in line with the Christian tradition, to keep the material and sensual world at a distance (5, 6). According to Scheller, it is worth noting the human ontological discord identified between two aspects: the biological being and the being in transcendental motion towards the supernatural world. The human is here characterized by the personal dimension related to the spiritual sphere, with the reservation that body and psyche are the forms of nature (6).

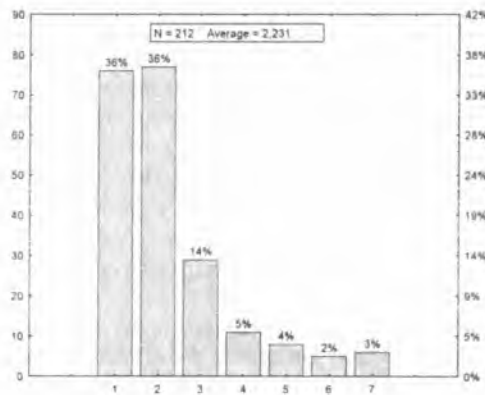


Fig. 1. Human corpse preparation is contradictory to my religious beliefs: 7 – strongly agree, 6 – agree, 5 – rather agree, 4 – neither agree nor disagree – I have no opinion, 3 – rather disagree, 2 – disagree, 1 – strongly disagree

The awareness declared by part of the group that the person whose body was exposed to autopsy used to live and suffer (Fig. 2) (80% of students answered so) did not translate into the unequivocal, considering the whole group, answer to the question of objectifying the human body

that the corpse preparation would entail. Despite the fact that over half of the surveyed group (57%) failed to recognize such objectifying, our analysis cannot overlook almost one third of respondents (31%) who noticed such a connection with the corpse preparation (Fig. 3). The object-like treatment of the human body assumes the explanation of the functioning of the body by means of the language used for the description of things. Moving around such a convention, one can reckon that when observing the body behaviour we would, for instance, discover the linear dependence between the stimulus and reaction and explain the whole thing, using the third grammatical person, by the action of such and such laws. This kind of approach aims to reduce the body to a biological third-person object set in motion by certain stimuli (2). In the metaphysical convention, the corpse is an object and not a person, thus it can be used manipulatively. If the subjects manifests any particular interest in them, this is not because of the ontic status, but due to the transfer of emotional bounds connected with one's own bodiness, due to what the bodiness will become after death (7). In Sartre's opinion, we should make a distinction between the body described by anatomy and physiology books and the body perceived objectively within the frame of emotional situation: 'dead body, pure past of life, it is no more inside a situation'. Human body after death is no longer in the dynamic emotional situation; it becomes a body in itself preserving a purely external relation to other objects and as such it can become the object of the examination of anatomy (2). The fact of medical students' noticing the objectifying of the human body in the autopsy procedures is undoubtedly related to the elements of analytical thinking, especially from the perspective of the final year of medical studies. The students' opinion concerning the objectifying of the human body in the corpse preparation may be influenced by the experiences gained during clinical training, done subsequent to anatomy classes, which create a specific emotional impression. On the one hand, clinical training and observations shaping the future doctor/patient relationships (discovering the reality of others) may be juxtaposed with the memorized picture of human being as an autopsy material; on the other hand, they can form a filter through which the final year students evaluate their own experiences from the corpse preparation activities, which took place during the opening year of studies. It is highly probable that in this case the picture of an objectified human body is fading in their consciousness. This fact may justify the high percentage of students who declare the awareness that the body they were examining used to be a living and suffering person, and a similarly high percentage of affirmative answers (74%) to the question of the connection of the corpse preparation with the awareness of death or transient character of human life. It seems probable, however, that students do not refer the awareness of the transient character of human life to themselves. In order to verify the aforesaid hypotheses, it would be necessary to perform a comparative study within a group of the 1st year medical students who perform autopsies during anatomy classes.

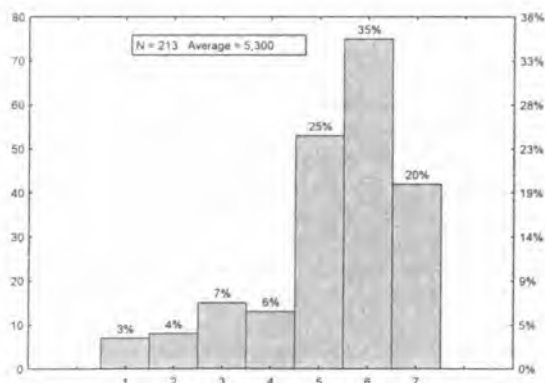


Fig. 2. Human corpse preparation is connected with the awareness that the person whose body we are examining used to live and suffer; 7 – strongly agree, 6 – agree, 5 – rather agree, 4 – neither agree nor disagree – I have no opinion, 3 – rather disagree, 2 – disagree, 1 – strongly disagree

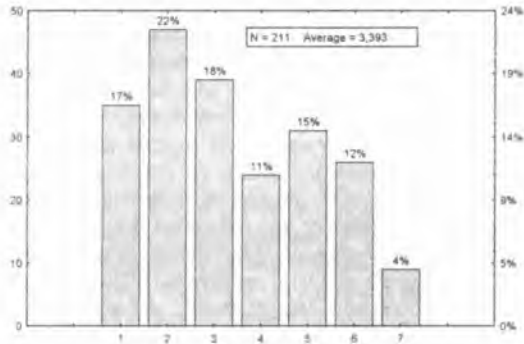


Fig. 3. Human corpse preparation is related to the awareness of objectifying the human body (treating the body as an object); 7 – strongly agree, 6 – agree, 5 – rather agree, 4 – neither agree nor disagree – I have no opinion, 3 – rather disagree, 2 – disagree, 1 – strongly disagree

The question of whether the corpse preparation during anatomy classes encourages the deliberation over offering one's own body for scientific and didactic purposes was answered as follows: 62% of the respondents gave the negative answer, 20% were indecisive, and 17% of the 6th year medical students of the Medical University of Lublin responded affirmatively (Fig. 4). A similar answer structure was obtained by Frederick Hafferty, who asked the 1st year students of Urban Medical School (USA), taking part in anatomy classes in a dissection room, whether they would be willing to offer their bodies for autopsy purposes. From among 99 asked students, 82 gave negative answers, and only 11 agreed (10). Such results may be interpreted by the fact that the phenomenon of death – when referred to one's own person – is considerably intangible for students, people entering academic or professional life (although not the phenomenon of death as such), despite frequent exposure to death during clinical training or in a dissection room. The students probably keep a specific mental distance that, on the one hand, makes them immune to the issue of death, which they often witness, and on the other hand, makes them alienated from the tanatological circle.

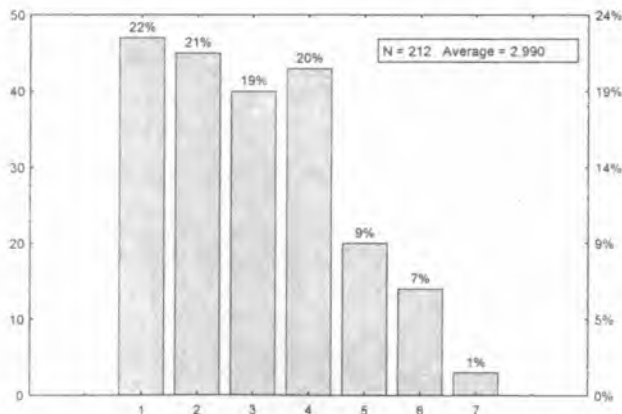


Fig. 4. Human corpse preparation encourages the deliberation over whether to offer our body for medical and scientific purposes: 7 – strongly agree, 6 – agree, 5 – rather agree, 4 – neither agree nor disagree – I have no opinion, 3 – rather disagree, 2 – disagree, 1 – strongly disagree

CONCLUSIONS

1. The students unambiguously accepted the usefulness of the corpse preparation for scientific cognition and therapeutic purposes that result from such cognition.
2. In students' opinion, there is no contradiction between body preparation and their religious beliefs.
3. Most respondents failed to notice the danger of objectifying the human body during anatomy classes.
4. It is highly probable that the final year medical students perceive the corpse preparation during anatomy classes through the prism of their consecutive experiences gained during clinical training.

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SUMMARY

The approach to corporal issues, present in the social awareness, changed over the centuries. Their understanding in the particular historical period and also now, requires the social relation to the human body after death to be taken into account. When examining the opinions of the final year medical students, we concluded that they recognized, to a great extent, the usefulness of the human body for the purposes of scientific cognition and its significance for medical therapy. The students do not perceive the corpse preparation as conflicting with their religious beliefs. On the one hand, observations and clinical training influencing the doctor/patient relationships may be juxtaposed in their imagination with the memorized picture of the human being as an autopsy material: on the other hand, they may provide a specific filter through which the final year medical students evaluate their own experiences from the 1st year anatomy classes. It is thus very probable that the picture of the human body as an object is fading in their consciousness. This fact also justifies a high percentage of students who admitted the awareness that the person whose body is now subject to autopsy exercises once used to live and suffer; and similarly high percentage of affirmative answers to the question of the relation of corpse preparation to the awareness of death and transient character of human life.

Status ludzkiego ciała w perspektywie preparatyki zwłok.
Analiza poglądów studentów ostatnich lat studiów medycznych

Obraz cielesności obecny w świadomości społecznej zmieniał się na przestrzeni wieków. Jego zrozumienie w danym momencie historycznym, także współcześnie, wymaga rozważenia relacji społecznej do ciała ludzkiego po śmierci. Badając poglądy studentów ostatnich lat studiów medycznych, stwierdziliśmy, że dostrzegają oni w wysokim stopniu użyteczność ludzkiego ciała w poznaniu naukowym oraz znaczenie tego poznania dla celów terapeutycznych medycyny. Studenci nie oceniają preparatyki ludzkich zwłok jako sprzecznej z przyjmowanymi przez nich poglądami religijnymi. Z jednej strony obserwacje i ćwiczenia kliniczne kształtujące relacje z pacjentami mogą kontrastować w ich świadomości z zapamiętanym obrazem człowieka jako preparatu anatomicznego, z drugiej zaś mogą być swoistym „filtrem”, przez który studenci ostatniego roku studiów medycznych oceniają własne doświadczenia z preparatyki anatomicznej z pierwszego roku studiów. W tym przypadku jest bardzo prawdopodobne, że ztraca się w ich świadomości obraz ludzkiego ciała jako przedmiotu. Tym faktem można również wyjaśnić bardzo wysoki odsetek studentów, którzy zadeklarowali świadomość tego, że człowiek, którego ciało poddawali preparatyce, kiedyś żył i cierpiał, oraz podobnie wysoki odsetek odpowiedzi twierdzących na pytanie o związek preparatyki zwłok ze świadomością śmierci, przemijania ludzkiego życia.