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Establishing a Para-Curriculum in Anatomy: The Cambridge Experience

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By the latter half of the 20th century, changes in the culture of academic medicine had transformed topographical anatomy from a research science to a course of study merely for undergraduates. With the teaching of gross anatomy having been relegated to a simple repetition of facts, the subject suffered an inexorable decline in scientific prestige. While medical students still needed to learn the names of the structures that had been discovered hundreds of years before, the microscopic, comparative, and developmental aspects of anatomy emerged as disciplines in their own right. In the words of one commentator, scientific anatomy had become a “victim of its own success”. The outcomes and standards for medical education set out in *Tomorrow's Doctors* have been instrumental in discouraging rote learning and ensuring effective integration of new knowledge, but an increasingly complex medical curriculum has drastically reduced the available time for teaching in the basic sciences, particularly for practical components. However, many additional factors influence the decision whether to retain a traditional topographical cadaveric dissection course. These include the availability of expertise, both technical and academic; procurement of material and high overhead costs, which effectively prohibit dissection as a teaching tool in many schools. Cambridge is fortunate to have maintained a cadaveric dissection programme since the establishment of the first Anatomy School in 1716. In the current programme, a distinct Applied Anatomy course runs in conjunction with dissection, comprising case-based learning, patient presentations, radiological and living surface anatomy, but it is dissection that offers the opportunity to establish a para-curriculum. In this presentation we outline the value added components of the course such as a Cadaver Medical History and Donor Tributes. These not only add value to anatomy teaching but emphasise the role of the Doctor as Scientist, Practitioner and Professional and deliver valuable transferable skills.