

## Cadaveric Oath and Its Relevance for Students of Anatomy

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### Abstract

Physicians and medical students must demonstrate sensitivity, respect, compassion, emotional support, and empathy at all times, to patients and their families. A doctor-patient relationship defines the uniqueness of the medical profession. It can be the most rewarding element of medical practice. But today in this age of technology and cost management, the traditional doctor-patient relationship is eroding. There is a lack of trust between patients' families and doctors. A number of forces have combined to devalue and diminish this doctor-patient relationship. The attainment of the best professional principles, attitudes, expertise, and conduct, during the transformation of a medical student to a practitioner, begins on the first day of medical college and continues throughout. The need of the hour is to retain the best elements of a doctor-patient relationship, and teach it to medical students. This training must be started as soon as a student enters medical college. Hence a subject called as 'Bioethics' has now been introduced into the curriculum. Bioethics education is the best way to achieve the goal of professionalism and it must start in the dissection hall for medical students by taking a 'Cadaveric Oath'. At the outset of the medical curriculum, it is the cadaver which imparts professional principles, knowledge, conduct and altruistic behaviour to a medical student. Hence cadavers are to be held in high esteem and are to be regarded as not only the 'first patient' but also the 'first teacher' of a medical student. To appreciate the altruistic behaviour of a cadaveric donor, which is a fundamental component of professionalism, taking a 'Cadaveric Oath' becomes an essential part of Bioethics. A 'Cadaveric Oath' is a pledge which the students recite on the opening day of Anatomy learning, to respect the dignity and integrity of the human remains that they are about to work on. A cadaveric oath is a unique and essential aspect of the medical curriculum.

This paper discusses the current challenges faced by medical professionals and emphasises the relevance of a 'Cadaveric Oath' as a part of Bioethics in today's age of advanced medical technology. The paper also elaborates the contents of a 'Cadaveric Oath' and the right method of administering it.

**Keywords:** Physicians; Medical Students; Patients; Doctor-Patient Relationship; Bioethics; Cadaveric Oath; First Patient; First Teacher.

### Introduction

Physicians are held in high esteem by society and they are expected to exhibit professional behaviour. A professional responsibility means placing the patient's concerns before their own and making good

medical care of patients, the highest priority. A physician-patient interaction is guided by a 'golden rule' - "do unto others as you would have them do unto you and your family." There should be respect for the patient's dignity, privacy and confidentiality. Physicians and medical students must demonstrate sensitivity, respect, compassion, emotional support, and empathy at all times—to patients and their families. A doctor-patient relationship defines the uniqueness of the medical profession. It can be the most rewarding element of medical practice. Nothing is more satisfying than to "help" an individual patient and receive their heartfelt thanks. But today in this age of technology and cost management, the traditional doctor-patient relationship is eroding.

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There is a lack of trust between patients' families and doctors. A number of forces have combined to devalue and diminish this doctor-patient relationship. There is an increasing expectation from patients that, with modern medicine and technology, a doctor should be able to guarantee a good outcome. When the desired outcome is not achieved, there are attacks on doctors and other medical staff, by angry friends and relatives of patients. The perception is that, any adverse outcome is due to the doctor's negligence. At the same time, patients hear of tales of corruption at medical colleges which further adds to their wrath [1].

Students enter medical colleges with varied personal and cultural milieu. A number of developments occur in the outlook of medical students while they undergo a transformation from being medical students to being practising physicians. The attainment of the best professional principles, attitudes, expertise, and conduct, during this transformation, begins on the first day of medical college and continues throughout their career. These developments are contributed not only by the curriculum, but also by their role models, teaching-learning activities in the classroom, their interactions with peers, faculty, patients, patients' families, other health care providers etc. All these factors influence their professional growth [2]. Hence the academic environment of a medical college, must try to positively direct a medical students' professional growth. They must create an environment which helps in cultivating professional values.

The need of the hour is to retain the best elements of a doctor-patient relationship, and teach it to medical students, in order to preserve this most satisfying aspect of the medical profession. This training must be started as soon as a student enters medical college. Hence a subject called as 'Bioethics' has now been introduced into the curriculum [3].

Anatomy is one of the basic medical science disciplines in the medical undergraduate curriculum which a student encounters as soon as he enters the medical college. Anatomy is a rigorous course requiring great commitment and enthusiasm. Without studying human anatomy in totality, medicine is meaningless. Anatomy is the mother of all medical sciences, and it cannot be thoroughly learnt without the use of cadavers. It is an established fact that students learn Anatomy from the dead. At the outset of the medical curriculum, it is this cadaver which imparts professional principles, knowledge, conduct and altruistic behaviour to a medical student. Hence

cadavers are to be held in high esteem and are regarded as the first patient of a medical student. Cadavers are required for studying human anatomy in all disciplines of medical science. When it comes to training 'doctors of tomorrow' in the science of anatomy, cadavers are indispensable. They convey more than mere facts and information. On the opening day of dissection, the students' are captivated at the first mention of the opportunity of human dissection. Gaining insight and appreciation of the structure of the human body, is a deep profound learning experience for a student. Human structures are complicated and vast. The more a student reads and dissects, the more knowledge he gains [4].

A fundamental component of professionalism is altruism; which is learnt from a cadaveric donor. A cadaver is like the first patient for a student. It emphasizes the humanistic side of medicine and is meant to inculcate in students, the ethos that will, guide them into becoming professional, caring and compassionate doctors. The cadaver belongs to a person who decided to donate his body to make a contribution to society. Students must recognise the generosity of these donors in bequeathing their bodies as 'silent mentors' for medical education. Thus to appreciate this altruistic behaviour of a cadaveric donor, taking a 'cadaveric oath' becomes an essential part of Bioethics [5].

#### *Cadaveric Oath*


An oath is a public statement or promise to behave or not to behave in certain ways.

A 'Cadaveric Oath' is a pledge which the students recite on the opening day of Anatomy learning, to respect the dignity and integrity of the human remains that they are about to work on.

For the process of oath taking, the students should be made to stand around a cadaver, with their right hand lifted up and pointing in the direction of the cadaver. The left hand should hold a copy of the oath. The oath is administered by the Head of the Department. The ceremony should be presided over by the faculty of the department and ideally also by the head of the institute and by a member of the Bioethics Committee.


Taking a cadaveric oath is a good way to start the medical curriculum. It helps to begin a discussion with the students about uprightness and ethical conduct. It is inspiring and makes the new batch of students feel as a part of the scientific community. Oath taking helps students from diverse backgrounds to remember that no matter where they come from, they're all in this together [6].

**K. J. Somaiya Medical College**  
**Department of Anatomy**



*Cadaveric Oath*

I, ....., a student of First MBBS, Batch of ..... K.J. Somaiya Medical College, solemnly pledge to respect the cadaver and treat this once living person with compassion and dignity as I use it to further my professional goals. to show due respect and gratitude towards this cadaver who will always remain my first teacher. to pay gratitude towards the next of kin of the donors for their endeavors in serving society selflessly even after death. to consider this as the best example of Living after Death. to always emulate this act of the donor to provide quality health service to society and to enhance the lives of all mankind.



*Cadaveric Oath*

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The cadaveric oath enlightens the student regarding the importance of these once-living bodies and how they should be treated with proper care and respect, and also the fact that Cadavers are their 'silent mentors'. It emphasizes the attitude that a student should always adopt; first as a learner and later as a physician or surgeon.

A cadaveric oath has both an educational role as well as it is designed to foster a selfless attitude of 'giving without recognition' among would-be-physicians. Knowledge and experience of the humanities is a key element of caring for patients. When physicians will, as practising doctors, recollect their cadaveric oath, it will expose them to the human experience of health care that may become lost in the daily activities of technological medicine.

The aim of a cadaveric oath is to turn out caring, informative, and clinically better doctors who would accord each and every future patient, the dignity and respect deserved. Such doctors will also develop sensitively as they improve their knowledge and practical skills and will always consider the 'human' inside the patient [7].

### Discussion

Ethics has today become a crucial part of learning and this message must permeate the educational environment. Regarding a cadaver, there are a number of moral and ethical debates nowadays. A dead person's body has an intrinsic ethical value that



requires a respectful attitude towards it. This ethical dilemma appears when an invasive manipulation or performing a dissection on the cadaver is required.

Dissection of the human body represents a procedure during which the body is sectioned in order to study the topographical anatomy and the structure of its components. Such a procedure represents an important part of medical education; the knowledge of anatomy thus acquired contributes decisively to the specialized training of physicians in general and of future surgeons in particular [8].

[\* File contains invalid data | In-line.JPG \*]

Students should be made aware that these cadavers who are their 'silent mentors' were once alive and were people like them, with dreams, hopes, aspirations, disappointments and despair. Hence they should be treated just as the way a live person is treated, not only as a 'first teacher' but also as the 'first patient'; to treat the cadaver as a simple corpse would mean lowering the evaluation standards applied to the person alive.

When someone is donating their body after death, they are helping to train the next generation of doctors. "This is how good doctors get better. Nothing gets perfected unless it is practiced on cadavers." Also a person who donates his body willingly for the advancement of medical science has done so without anything to gain from it. The students don't know the name of the person they are dissecting, so in a sense it means that the person has given himself up for study without recognition. This is a quality which all medical students or would-be doctors should imbibe i.e. to 'give without recognition'. Hence, it is imperative that the memory of the deceased be respected. The painful and irreversible loss a family has suffered has also to be taken into account [9].

'Silent teachers' speak volumes. Cadavers used in anatomical teaching help health science students to understand not only the structural organisation of the human body but also they help in learning clinical examinations, surgical procedures. They also prepare students for the study of pathology, so as to appreciate the basis of diseases.

Cadaveric oath also emphasizes to the students that they are their first patients. Just like every patient is different, every cadaver is also different just like patients. They are also irreplaceable, unique teachers of the human anatomy. These silent mentors teach by letting students explore the wonders of the human anatomy. No other mode of learning can replace the hands-on experience derived from working with cadavers. Here, students can appreciate three-dimensional anatomy and anatomical variations.

They can have a tactile understanding of real human tissues like arteries, veins, nerves organs, bones. Imagine a surgeon performing a surgical procedure directly on a patient when he has never actually worked on a cadaver [10].

Dissection of a cadaver helps students to develop attitudes of ethics, compassion, and humanism which are indispensable in the medical profession. The patient-physician relationship is based on professionalism and an ethical framework of humanism in which love, charity, and wisdom prevail. Imbibing values like respect, responsibility and gratitude can never be achieved using computer based tools or web based tools for learning anatomy.

Lastly, the study of a cadaver conveys to students an appreciation of mortality, first that of the cadaver and ultimately their own. Cadavers serve to constantly remind the students about the impermanence of life [11].

Some professionals equate a White Coat Ceremony (WCC) to a cadaveric oath. WCC is an educational ritual that is carried out in medical education among all those courses that are required to don the white coat. It brings together first year students with their families and the faculty in a symbol of oath taking, related presentations and their ceremony of donning the white coat. It does not involve a cadaver at all. It is carried out mostly by students of optometry, dentistry, pharmacy and medicine. On the other hand, a Cadaveric oath is to be taken by those students who are going to dissect cadavers [12].

## Conclusion

In the modern era Bioethics has got immense importance. The name itself teaches many facts about life. By taking the oath on the first anatomy day, students will respect not only the dead but also the living. Students will understand that there is life even after death and they will never forget the cadaver as their first teacher in anatomy. Hence a 'Cadaveric Oath' is a unique and essential aspect of the medical curriculum. In order to provide medical care in an ethical and humane way, physicians need to be *better* educated about specific aspects of ethical medical practice and learn to think critically about the increasingly complex world of medical practice. Bioethics education is the best way to achieve this goal and it must start in the dissection hall for medical students by taking a cadaveric oath. Later Bioethics education can be carried out for students in a clinical setting as well as for interns, residents and continuing medical education for practicing doctors.

*Competing Interests*

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

*Authors' Contributions*

SPS drafted the manuscript, performed the literature review & SR assisted with writing the paper.

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