

UCT body donor programme continues despite ongoing pandemic

The University of Cape Town's (UCT) Faculty of Health Sciences has maintained its body donor programme during the Covid-19 pandemic, allowing its physiotherapy, occupational therapy, science and medical students, including surgeons from various disciplines, to experience hands-on dissection and practise new surgical techniques.



(Fromleft, back) Shirees Benjamin and Michael Cassar, with (front) Megan Petersen and Jacques Jacobs, members of the team that manages UCT's body donor programme.

Globally, the pandemic has forced many health sciences faculties to close their programmes.

Associate Professor Delva Shamley, the head of the Division of Clinical Anatomy and Biological Anthropology in the Department of Human Biology, said that as a result, UCT has been able to maintain practical teaching programmes in line with the level of lockdown.

Michael Cassar, the chief technical officer, led and implemented the health and safety procedures in the faculty mortuary, where donated bodies are stored.

Learning from 'silent teachers'

"Our students won't lose the privilege of learning anatomy from these 'silent teachers'," Shamley said.

“Learning about the human form is an honour and a privilege and one which is only possible because of our ‘silent teachers’. The appreciation and respect for their contribution to our learning is never more evident than at the dedication ceremony where our students’ humility and thanks emerge [in] song, poetry and dance. A beautiful African tradition.”

Not even the advent of virtual teaching and sophisticated multimedia models can replace the value of dissecting cadavers, said the department’s Dr Geney Gunston.

Rite of passage

“Dissection is a rite of passage, introducing students to the concepts of life and death, which they are expected to deal with compassionately as professionals. Dissection allows students to see, feel and explore structures such as tendons, nerves, fascia and vessels, and introduces them to the variability of the human body and the uniqueness of each donor.”

In a recent letter to the dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences, Professor Lionel Green-Thompson and Professor Johannes Fagan (Division of Otorhinolaryngology) highlighted the irreplaceable value of the body donor programme. Fagan paid tribute to Cassar and his team who manage the body donor programme. They have made important contributions to surgical training at UCT, Fagan wrote.

“This has become even more relevant with Covid-19 having delayed many surgical operations and reduced surgical training opportunities,” said Fagan. “The Department of Human Biology makes skeletal material available to our registrars to learn and perfect their otology surgical skills in our lab in the Groote Schuur Hospital Old Main Building.”

Compensating for reduced surgical training opportunities

Fagan said that they were also able to run training courses for registrars on sinus surgery at the Red Cross War Memorial Children’s Hospital’s Surgical Skills Training Centre.

“Other surgical disciplines also make use of cadaveric material for surgical training,” he wrote.

“While such cadaver dissections do not fully mitigate the loss of surgery opportunities caused by Covid-19, they do go some way to compensate for the lack of surgery.”

Strict health and safety measures

Cassar said that their already strict health and safety measures have been enhanced to ensure that all donor bodies received by the department were Covid-19 negative. The mortuary team have worked closely with hospitals, treating doctors and their contracted funeral undertakers to ensure this.

The Department of Human Biology’s database has approximately 2,800 donors but hopes to boost this. They plan to run an awareness campaign to inform the public of the body donor programme, said anatomy senior lecturer and neuroscientist Dr Adhil Bhagwandin.

Dr Bhagwandin works with second- and third-year medical students and teaches health and rehabilitation students.

Annual dedication ceremony

However, one aspect of the programme that has been affected by Covid-19 is the department’s annual dedication ceremony to honour and thank the ‘silent teachers’ and their families. This ceremony is driven by second-year medical students.

This year the students' contributions took the form of a video, said Bhagwandin. This will be hosted on the Division of Clinical Anatomy and Biological Anthropology's website and will be distributed to students on Vula, the student learning portal.

"We hope that the video relays our sentiments of thanks and appreciation for the valuable learning experience made possible by the generosity of the donors."

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