

Nameless in death, alive in their hearts

Anatomy class pays respects to cadaver

By Eleanor Yang Su

STAFF WRITER

December 19, 2007

The students were in awe of the beauty of the wrinkled body.

They compared the symmetrical lines of her abdominal oblique muscles to a fanned-out fern. They were fascinated by her atrophied biceps – pencil-thin, yet smooth and delicate.

For 10 weeks, the Miramar College students have huddled over a metal gurney, dissecting the cadaver of a nameless 82-year-old woman, carefully cutting through skin and separating tissue and fat from muscles and organs.

Yesterday, the anatomy students commemorated the life of their “first patient,” reading poetry and laying down flowers next to a sapling on campus to thank the donor for her generous gift to their education.

“You gave us everything you possibly could, and through you we learned, explored and understood,” student Arianne Furman read from a poem she wrote. “You brought us closer to our medical goal, and you will be remembered, not just your body, but your soul.”

In recent decades, an increasing number of colleges have been holding cadaver memorials, both to teach students about humanity and professionalism, and to encourage the public to donate their bodies to education.

“It’s important for them to see the patient as a person, and not a case,” said professor Kevin Petti, the teacher leading an upper-level anatomy course and the memorial at Miramar College. “This is really their first patient. If you can’t treat this person with respect, then you’re likely not going to be treating the first living patient with respect.”

Anatomists estimate that virtually all medical schools hold memorials for their cadavers. The University of California San Diego held its service last week with 120 medical students, some of whom performed musical pieces composed for the occasion. The bodies will be cremated and scattered into the ocean.

The University of Hawaii’s program invites immediate family members of the donors and features poetry readings and hula dances by the medical students, said Steven Labrash, director of the body donor program at the university’s medical school. Family members can either keep the cremated remains or watch students canoe 200 yards off the coast of the island and scatter the ashes in the Pacific.

As demand has grown to acquire cadavers to be used to conduct experimental surgeries and develop new technological devices, colleges have been making the memorial events more public to draw attention to their need.

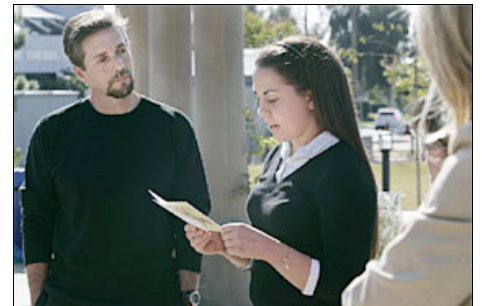
“The major message we try to give is we really appreciate the gift we get, and it’s very important for education and research,” said Maria C. Savoia, vice dean for medical education at UCSD’s medical school.

Some say the memorials are even more important to provide a sense of closure for the relatives of donors.

To preserve the bodies, many schools transfer the cadavers from hospitals, meaning relatives do not get to see the



PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune
Miramar College student Arianne Furman placed flowers beside a memorial stone yesterday to honor a nameless woman who donated her body to education.



PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune
Miramar College professor Kevin Petti listened while student Arianne Furman read a poem dedicated to the woman whose body she and her classmates had been studying in an anatomy course.

body at funerals and memorials, said Richard Drake, secretary-treasurer for the American Association of Anatomists.

“We need to embalm it right away, or it won't preserve as well and won't be as useful,” said Drake, director of anatomy at the Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine.

Cremated remains often aren't returned to families until two or three years later.

Furman and her peers at Miramar College said they understand and appreciate the sacrifice families have made. In class, they showed respect for the patient's privacy by covering her face and genitals.

Surrounded by the odor of formaldehyde, students explored the effects of age on the body, finding a cyst (a fluid-filled sore), gallstones and atrophied muscles.

They noted the patient's missing uterus, meaning she had had a hysterectomy, and her abnormally large stomach. The cadaver, like others on loan from UCSD, will be returned and cremated.

Student Jody Wall, 25, who's considering a career as a physical therapist or doctor, said he treated the body with “kindness and love.”

“You have greatly contributed to my future and I will always remember you,” Wall said, reading from a thank-you note. He left the note next to an engraved stone the class placed in the campus plaza to mark their respect and appreciation for all donors to the program.

■ Eleanor Yang Su: (619) 542-4564; eleanor.su@uniontrib.com