

Teaching of Anatomy: a Job for a Biologist or a Surgeon?

Dear Sir,

During the past few years there has been a considerable stir about spurious qualifications and the practice of medicine and dentistry by people who are not qualified in medicine and surgery but have quack diplomas to hang in their offices.

There is also an area in which teaching by people lacking a medical degree is actually legitimised by the authorities, and that is the teaching of anatomy, a fundamental discipline in the curriculum of studies of the physician-surgeon that is often entrusted to biologists. It may be that they can teach a certain amount of microscopic anatomy and embryology, and so cover the same ground as histology, which was a minor discipline up to 15 years ago but is now a major one.

What they are certainly not equipped to teach is the sort of macroscopic and topographical anatomy that is really of use to medical undergraduates because biologists do not know what is important in medicine, particularly in surgery. It is not possible to teach anatomy as a science, but it is necessary to teach clinical anatomy.

So the teaching becomes theoretical, strong on slides and weak on practice with no work on cadavers, the essential test bench and training for physician-surgeons who do not want to be excluded from the European circuit. In Italy practical anatomy is no longer taught as it is done in some other western and eastern countries. We think that there are three reasons for this grave gap in the training of Italian doctors: the lack of bodies for the dissection room; the presence of too many biologists among lecturers in human anatomy in the faculties of medicine and

surgery; and lack of experience in dissection among lecturers.

There is now a remedy for the first of these causes: the new law on the donation of organs for transplantation, already approved by the Senate Health Committee, which provides for the donation of the whole body as well as the organs for teaching and scientific purposes.

The availability of bodies must, however, be matched by that of a body of lecturers competent to teach practical anatomy, and we do not think that biologists are equipped to do this. Not only are they not allowed by law to dissect bodies, but also they do not know how to.

So the second cause is much harder to remedy. Biologists, who have taken over the teaching of human anatomy, have to stay in the laboratories and leave the dissection room to others. Human anatomy must be taught in the dissection room and not in the laboratory.

It is to be hoped that surgeons, whose forebears conferred such distinction on the discipline of human anatomy – Baglivi, Lancisi, Malpighi and Morgagni, to name but a few – may return to the chairs of anatomy of the faculties of medicine and surgery from which they have been ousted by biologists, who should go back to teaching biology students.

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