

# Qualitative Analysis of Medical Students' Speeches at Memorial Services for Body Donors

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## ABSTRACT

Student speeches are a common component at medical school memorial ceremonies for body donors. Although some individual speeches have been published, there is no available research on the content within them. This study qualitatively analyzed medical students' speeches in 28 recorded services retrieved from medical school websites. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to quantify the number of speeches (138), the length of speeches, and the number of memorialized donors (3,004). Six themes emerged from the data: (1) Each donor's sacrifice impacts learning and future patient care; (2) The donors' loved ones deserve recognition; (3) The donors are "first patients" and teachers; (4) Students feel a duty to their donors; (5) Human anatomy is unique and complex; (6) Life is finite. The results of this study demonstrated that dissection provided an awareness of mortality and beneficial anatomical knowledge for medical students, which would enhance their care towards future patients. The ceremonies allowed students to humanize their donors by providing them an opportunity to acknowledge the donors' sacrifice and honor the donors' loved ones. This study supports dissection being considered a critical educational experience.

## KEYWORDS

Memorial; Anatomy; Dissection; Body donors; Mortality; Education; Medical school; Qualitative

## INTRODUCTION

It is a common, longstanding tradition for anatomy programs at medical schools in the United States to hold memorial ceremonies for body donors. According to the literature, the earliest recorded memorial ceremonies were held in the 1980s by Wright State University's School of Medicine and the University of Massachusetts Medical School.<sup>1,2</sup> By 2013, over 90% of human anatomy programs at medical schools held memorial ceremonies, with most (75%) of those having hosted ceremonies consistently for 10 to 20 years.<sup>3</sup>

There are several common components to memorial ceremonies for body donors. They tend to be organized primarily by students and are attended by students, faculty, and staff.<sup>3</sup> Over half (68%) of medical schools also report inviting family members of body donors.<sup>3</sup> Most ceremonies include speeches with a variety of other elements, such as poetry reading, dancing, candle lighting, and displaying the names and photographs of the donors.<sup>2-10</sup>

Memorial ceremonies provide numerous benefits for both students and donors' loved ones. Although students tend to detach from the donors' humanity during the dissection process,<sup>11-13</sup> research suggests that memorial ceremonies help to restore students' view of the donors' personhood.<sup>6, 14, 15</sup> Memorials also enhance students' appreciation for the donors,<sup>6, 14, 15</sup> enable them to process complex emotions about mortality,<sup>10</sup> and allow them to find closure.<sup>2, 10</sup> The donors' loved ones can also find a sense of closure<sup>15</sup> from the memorial ceremonies by learning the value of the donation.<sup>2, 15</sup> Given the benefits, experts have recommended memorial ceremonies as a best practice for anatomy programs.<sup>16-19</sup>

There is a need to analyze common themes among medical students' speeches from body donor memorial services. Although students' speeches given at memorial ceremonies have been published, there is a lack of research on the common themes found within those speeches. Individual student speeches that were given at the Yale School of Medicine<sup>5-9</sup> and the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine and Science<sup>20, 21</sup> have been published in peer-reviewed journals over the years. Though these publications preserve the words spoken at donor memorial services, no research has analyzed the individual speeches or identified common themes among them across different medical institutions. Previous research on medical school body donor memorial services consists of faculty observation and reflection of the memorial services,<sup>2, 10</sup> interviews of students about emotional and learning experiences

from the memorials,<sup>14</sup> and open-ended survey items that invited students to reflect on the effects of the memorials.<sup>15</sup> Granted, there is a benefit of analyzing medical students' responses to interview and open-ended questions; however, given that scholars have analyzed eulogies to understand how people frame death (i.e., organize experiences and action from death) and make sense of death (i.e., give some type of meaning to death),<sup>22</sup> there is also a benefit, and need, for a deeper analysis of how medical students frame and make sense of their experiences through their speeches given during anatomy memorial ceremonies. As such, this study aimed to answer the research question: "What are the major themes within medical students' speeches during body donor memorial services that might frame and make sense of the dissection process?"

## METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Prior to data retrieval, this study was approved by Appalachian State University's IRB (study # HS-24-159).

In September of 2023, the anatomical gift program websites from each Doctor of Medicine and Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine school in the United States were searched for donor memorial services. Publicly available online services on program websites were included in the study. For each service, the number of student speeches, the length of time for each speech, and the number of donors who were honored in the memorials were noted.

Methods common to basic qualitative thematic analysis were used to analyze the students' speeches. Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative approach used for discovering and categorizing themes (i.e., repeated patterns) across a data set.<sup>23</sup> Braun & Clarke's six steps for thematic analysis were conducted by: (1) inspecting the data (during and after data collection) through data "immersion"<sup>24</sup> and taking notes of common patterns, (2) working together<sup>25</sup> to create the initial codebook via inductive coding (i.e., coding patterns that emerge from the data and not from preconceived ideas or existing frameworks)<sup>23</sup> while considering both the "manifest content" (i.e., the actual words in the speeches) and the "latent content" (i.e., the underlying meaning of the words),<sup>26</sup> (3) sorting codes to identify, define, and refine the overarching themes that emerged (i.e., "crystallization" of themes),<sup>24</sup> (4) reevaluating the themes, (5) solidifying and defining the themes, and (6) selecting quotes from the data to exemplify each theme.<sup>23, 27</sup>

The coding process was conducted in two phases. First, the student researchers and faculty mentor initially worked together to create a codebook by identifying, defining, and refining the overarching themes that emerged (i.e., "crystallization" of themes).<sup>24</sup> Second, each student researcher used the codebook to code half of the speeches using Microsoft Word. Whenever a student researcher was uncertain of a code to use during the coding process, they resolved the issue through discussion with each other and the faculty mentor to reach consensus.<sup>28-30</sup> All identifying information was removed from the data (i.e., the names of donors, students, family members). During the coding process, it was estimated that "saturation" (i.e., when distinct themes no longer emerge from the data)<sup>31</sup> took place during the fifth memorial service. The researchers also tallied the frequency of themes found in each speech.

## RESULTS

A total of 28 online ceremonies were included in the study. Of those, 17 (61%) included the names or specified the number of donors who were honored at the ceremonies, for a total of 3,004 donors. For this study, there were a total of 138 student speeches, varying in length, with a total of 4 hours and 45 minutes of speeches analyzed (Table 1).

| Medical School   | Donors | Speeches | Total Time    |
|--|--------|----------|---------------|
| Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine                | *      | 12       | 15 min 47 sec |
| Albany Medical College                                 | 207    | 5        | 25 min 29 sec |
| Augusta University                                     | 107    | 9        | 22 min 24 sec |
| Burrell College of Osteopathic Medicine                | *      | 5        | 9 min 30 sec  |
| Creighton University                                   | *      | 12       | 5 min 15 sec  |
| Kansas City University College of Osteopathic Medicine | 54     | 6        | 7 min 40 sec  |
| Kansas University                                      | *      | 2        | 6 min 42 sec  |
| Mayo Clinic Alix School of Medicine                    | 203    | 4        | 7 min 57 sec  |
| Northeast Ohio Alix School of Medicine                 | 53     | 1        | 52 sec        |
| SUNY Upstate Medical University                        | *      | 1        | 1 min 30 sec  |
| University of Alabama at Birmingham                    | 462    | 2        | 4 min 4 sec   |
| University of Arizona                                  | 62     | 2        | 2 min 38 sec  |
| University of Buffalo                                  | *      | 21       | 18 min 7 sec  |
| University of California, Irvine                       | *      | 4        | 16 min 27 sec |
| University of California, Los Angeles                  | 216    | 5        | 15 min 18 sec |

|  |       |     |               |
|--|-------|-----|---------------|
| University of California, San Diego  | *     | 11  | 17 min 9 sec  |
| University of Cincinnati   | 104   | 3   | 11 min 48 sec |
| University of Hawaii Manoa   | 126   | 4   | 8 min 17 sec  |
| University of Indiana  | *     | 4   | 16 min 24 sec |
| University of Iowa   | 192   | 6   | 25 min 13 sec |
| University of Minnesota  | 506   | 4   | 7 min 10 sec  |
| University of Mississippi  | 112   | 3   | 4 min 40 sec  |
| University of Nevada Reno  | *     | 1   | 3 min 2 sec   |
| University of Toledo   | 181   | 2   | 4 min 53 sec  |
| Washington University in St. Louis   | 130   | 3   | 7 min 29 sec  |
| Wayne State University   | 254   | 2   | 9 min 30 sec  |
| Western University of Health Sciences - College of Osteopathic Medicine of the Pacific | 35    | 2   | 5 min 20 sec  |
| Wright State University  | *     | 2   | 4 min 41 sec  |
| Total  | 3,004 | 138 | 4 hr 45 min   |

Table 1. The medical school's number of donors, number of speeches, and total duration of speeches. \*Not specified during the memorial

From the qualitative analysis, six major themes emerged from the data: (1) Each donor's sacrifice impacts learning and future patient care; (2) The donors' loved ones deserve recognition; (3) The donors are teachers and first patients; (4) Students feel a duty to their donors; (5) Human anatomy is unique and complex; (6) Life is finite.

Along with each theme description below, four representative quotes are provided with italicized words that reinforce the theme's meaning.

*Theme #1: Each donor's sacrifice impacts learning and future patient care*

The most prevalent theme among the student speeches was that each body donor had a vast effect within the healthcare system. Each donor directly impacted the education of the students dissecting them and indirectly impacted every future person those medical students helped once they became doctors. The longevity of a donor's sacrifice stretched far beyond the dissection lab and affected the health of each living person aided by future physicians. This theme was found in 88 (63%) of the speeches.

*"Your gift will keep going through time and space with a broad, deep, and untold ripple effect. So many lives will be impacted as future patients and doctors intersect."* (Northeast Ohio Medical University, Student)

*"Over the next thirty years, this contribution, this incredible gift, is going to impact thousands and thousands of patients that we're going to encounter."* (Wright State University, Third-year student)

*"The generous donations allow us to provide better care for our future patients and become better health care providers."* (University of Minnesota, First-year student)

*"Not only did you [donor] impact the lives of every person sitting in front of me who came to celebrate your life, you somehow managed to impact the lives of hundreds of people you never met, and you did so after you passed."* (University of Arizona, Third-year student)

*Theme #2: The donors' loved ones deserve recognition*

During the services, many students acknowledged the sacrifice made by the donors' families and friends. While not giving up their own bodies, parting with a loved one soon after death was not without challenges, especially knowing strangers studied and dissected them. The loved ones had an important role in each donor's life before and after death, and their generosity was worthy of appreciation. This theme was found in 70 (50%) of the speeches.

*"I wholeheartedly express gratitude for you [families] having the strength to be present today while you still may be grieving the loss of your loved ones."* (University of Indiana, First-year student)

*"For the bounty of knowledge gained from the (donor) patients, we say thank you. We express our appreciation of families, friends, and loved ones who have placed their trust in us."* (Western University of Health Sciences - College of Osteopathic Medicine of the Pacific, First-year student & class president)

*"Their donation would not have been possible without you [family]."* (University of Mississippi, Student)

*"I just want to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of the family members of all the donors to the anatomy lab."* (University of Creighton, Student)

*Theme #3: The donors are "first patients" and teachers*

A common theme was that the donors were the medical students' "first patients." Not only did the donors act as bodies to dissect, but they were also true teachers to learn from, showing the students aspects of anatomy and medicine that textbooks, diagrams, and lectures never could. This theme was found in 60 (43%) of the speeches.

*"Your loved ones were our greatest teachers; they were the ones who helped us see inside."* (Northeast Ohio Medical University, Student)

*"Each student that has walked into the anatomy lab at KCU has the honor of learning from their first ever patient, the individual who so graciously donated their body. These individuals who donated their bodies have taught us much more than about what the anatomy of their body contains."* (Kansas City University College of Osteopathic Medicine, Student anatomy fellow)

*"The thing that really stays close to heart is that your loved one was our first patient that we'll never forget."* (Wright State University, Third-year student)

*"You [donor] are my teacher throughout my first year of medical school."* (University of Arizona, Third-year student)

*Theme #4: Students feel a duty to their donors*

Another recurring sentiment was that since a stranger gave themselves to aid the students' learning, they often felt apprehensive and underqualified to work on the donor's body. This charged them with an obligation to treat their donors in a venerable way through meticulous and respectful dissection. They felt the need to make the donor's gift worthwhile by not squandering the opportunity given to them in the lab. This theme was found in 56 (40%) of the speeches.

*"It wasn't merely raw knowledge that was gained...we also learned how to care, how to respect [the donors]."* (Kansas City University College of Osteopathic Medicine, Student)

*"Every action taken in the lab was not a simple pursuit of fact, but in respect for the gift that was given to us."* (Burrell College of Osteopathic Medicine, First-year student)

*"I remember how humbling it was on our very first day of anatomy ... someone who had trusted our institution with the donation of their body trusted us with everything they had left to give to this world, trusted us with their final gift. That moment to me felt heavy. In fact, that entire week felt heavy, and it should because a gift like that should not be taken lightly."* (University of Iowa, Second-year student)

*"I was uneasy and a bit nervous about how we could balance understanding the beauty and complexity of the human body while also honoring this amazing soul."* (University of Buffalo, Former student)

*Theme #5: Human anatomy is unique and complex*

The students' speeches frequently mentioned that the donors' anatomy was unique and complex. Each person had a history and body specific to themselves. Working with donors showed the medical students that future patients would not perfectly align with textbook drawings, but would rather be individualized and complicated. This theme was found in 48 (34%) of the speeches.

*"As much as we appreciate all that we can learn from our books, pictures, and million-dollar simulations that our school provides, nothing can compare to having an actual person with whom to work."* (University of Cincinnati, Second-year student)

*"I learned about the complexity of human lives, the working parts that make each and every one of us unique but also the same."* (Indiana University, First-year student)

*"It has always been taught to me through texts and drawings and textbooks. But the opportunity to learn anatomical structures through actually holding them and seeing them has enhanced my education in a significant way."* (Mayo Clinic Alix School of Medicine, First-year student)

*“Learning about the complexity of how we’re designed made me realize how many things have to go right in order for me to even be alive”*  
(Indiana University, First-year student)

*Theme #6: Life is finite*

This theme featured students’ acknowledgment that life is fleeting. Many students referenced death as being made real to them in the anatomy lab when they were confronted with mortality every time they worked with the deceased. Students wondered who the donors were as people and the lives they lived before passing away. This theme was found in 32 (23%) of the speeches.

*“Through death, our donors were able to bring our class to life.”* (University of Nevada Reno, First-year student & class president)

*“You [donor] are the wisdom that death is the greatest invention of life, that the old returns to the earth and the stars and it cycles anew...and that how I live will determine whether I cower in regret when death greets me...or smirk bravely without remorse.”*  
(University of San Diego California, Student)

*“He [donor] was a son to someone, likely a friend to many others. He may have been a sibling, a spouse, or a dad. Maybe a grandfather or a great-grandfather. We didn’t know much, but we [the lab group] knew he had spent 72 years on this earth. That was 50 more years than I had been alive at that time.”* (University of Buffalo, Student)

*“In the history of the earth, our lives are half a letter in an immense novel.”* (University of Hawaii Manoa, First-year student)

## DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the common themes found within medical students’ speeches from 28 medical schools’ online body donor memorial services. The qualitative, thematic analysis found six themes, in which students framed and made sense of the body donor, the donors’ families, and the learning that took place through the dissection process. While previous observations, focus group interviews, and surveys found that memorial services help students to appreciate donors, view the donors as people, and process concepts about mortality,<sup>6, 10, 14, 15</sup> this study added to the body of research in that memorials may enhance students’ perspective that donors are teachers/patients that can impact learning and future patient care, appreciation for donors’ loved ones, and understanding that human anatomy has unique attributes for each person.

The findings from this study indicate that the dissection process was valuable for students in learning anatomy and can have numerous, wide-ranging, positive impacts on their future patients. This reflects other qualitative studies about students’ experiences when dissecting donors. Specifically, students have reported that dissection was a critical component for learning anatomy, as it provided a thorough, hands-on experience when compared to learning from textbooks or diagrams,<sup>12, 32</sup> which could then be used to help their patients in the future.<sup>33</sup> As such, the findings from this study align with other scholars’ views in the debate regarding the continued use of donor dissection for medical school training, as compared to the use of computer technology for teaching anatomy.<sup>34, 35</sup> What is unique to the current study is that memorial services may help to emphasize this to students beyond the dissection laboratory experience.

The findings from this study also mirror previous research regarding the impact of memorials on students’ humanization of donors. Prior research shows that medical students tend to detach from their donors during dissection.<sup>11-13</sup> Memorials for donors have been shown to be beneficial because they allow students to restore a view of the donors’ humanity by emphasizing donor personhood through testimonies and engaging with the donors’ loved ones.<sup>6, 14, 15</sup> This study indicates that ceremonies provide students with an opportunity to outwardly express the emotions that they tend to feel during the dissection process, including gratitude towards the donors,<sup>12, 32, 36, 37</sup> and a sense that donors were both their teachers and their “first patients.”<sup>13, 32, 38</sup>

The students’ speeches in this study indicated that dissecting body donors led to students contemplating death. Previous studies have also found that students have thoughts of mortality during dissection.<sup>11-13, 32</sup> This supports medical schools hosting memorial ceremonies for students to express their thoughts about death. The findings also support experts’ recommendations that anatomy instructors provide space for students to process their emotions about death and dying before and during dissection, given the nature of anatomy laboratories and the constant exposure to the dead.<sup>39-42</sup>

Importantly, this study adds to the literature in that memorials to body donors have the potential to enhance medical students’ appreciation for the family of body donors. The existing literature on body donor memorials have not shown students’ views towards the donors’ loved ones. Yet, students’ speeches emphasize those who were related to, or had a deep connection to, the body donor. This reflects eulogy research on social discourse of relational identity, meaning that eulogists may extend gratitude to those who attend a memorial service.<sup>22</sup> In addition, students’ speeches indicate that each donor underscored that actual anatomy may be different compared to other people and textbook illustrations.



There were limitations to this study. First, the memorial ceremonies included in this research were only from videos provided on medical school websites. Future studies on this topic may want to include ceremonies on other online video sharing platforms, such as YouTube.com.<sup>4</sup> Second, the ceremonies were recorded between 2019 to 2023, which may have been due to recording funeral services becoming more common during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>43</sup> Since this study was limited to recorded memorial services that were from recent years, future studies could compare the themes seen in these services to those found in services from previous or future years. Third, given the qualitative nature of the study, the results are not generalizable to all memorial ceremonies; however, the results may still be “transferable”<sup>44</sup> to ceremonies that have similar contexts. Fourth, this study did not analyze the words of faculty members, music, or poetry presented in these services. Further research could be conducted on these aspects of memorial services, as they may convey additional findings to those reported in this study. Finally, it is worth noting that since popular forms of artificial intelligence (AI) were in existence during the study’s timeframe and commonly used as a form of ghostwriting,<sup>45</sup> it is possible that speeches analyzed for this study may have been wholly or partially composed by AI and not organically written by the students.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study qualitatively analyzed medical students’ speeches given during online memorial ceremonies for body donors. Common themes of mortality, the uniqueness of human anatomy, and the donors being selfless first patients and teachers were seen, indicating the gratitude possessed by medical students for their donors and the importance of dissection labs for their education. The findings from this study add to the literature, and also align with previous research that memorial services aid students in finding closure and humanizing their donors, supporting that the dissection process is valuable in teaching anatomy to medical students.

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#### PRESS SUMMARY

Medical students regularly give speeches at memorial ceremonies honoring the individuals who donated their bodies for medical education. However, there is no published research that has analyzed what is expressed in these speeches, and this paper aims to fill that gap. We analyzed 138 student speeches from 28 ceremonies to understand what future doctors took away from the human dissection experience. Six key themes emerged, including a deep respect for the donors, a recognition of the donors' families, the donors being the students' first patients, and a strong sense of responsibility. Students also expressed how the anatomy lab helped them appreciate the complexity of the human body and grapple with mortality. Our findings support that the act of dissection and these ceremonies are more than just anatomically educational; they offer a complex, emotional experience that aids in shaping more competent and compassionate doctors.