

FIRST DAY OF CLASS

Each chemically preserved body is stored in one of the \$8,000 stainless steel immersion dissecting tables that are arranged in two rows throughout the rooms. At the start of each dissecting session, the steel tabletop doors are opened as a closet door might be, and a pedal raises the body for access and observation.

"I think a lot of people, the girls especially, are surprised by how much labor it is," said Cindy-Sue Turco, whose previous experience with dissection involved mice, rats and hamsters.

It's no accident that dissection begins on the back. Emotions already are in full swing, but at least starting out by working on the patient's back gives students a few weeks to sort out their feelings about the process – before the bodies are turned over.

"When you think of a person, you think of their face," said Katie Powell, whose father is a physician and whose brother is in the same class. "That was the most difficult part emotionally. You know, it really affected me.

"But you just kind of take the next step and keep moving."

Students work in six-person teams divided into Alpha and Beta groups. Alpha and Beta take turns either dissecting or closely observing. They work with a manual that shows them where to make a cut and how to find what they are looking for. More often, Romrell or one of the 18 second-year medical students who serve as teaching assistants will provide guidance.

Inside the lab, the odor from chemicals is strong, but none of the first-year students in 2009 wore a breathing mask. An exhaust system that fully replaces air in the room every three minutes has exhaust fans near the floor, where the heavier vapor from formaldehyde tends to gather. Some students smear a dab of Vick's VapoRub under their nose, though they said the chemical smells become easier to ignore after a few days.

Each body has a unique smell, so there is an adjustment period each time the teams rotate to a new one.

"I was kind of concerned I would get nauseous or stop and be overcome at the thought that this is someone who at some point recently was alive," said Souhail Karam, a student from Boca Raton whose outgoing personality and wit sometimes helped his team get past sensitive situations.

"I guess when you're working you kind of get caught up in it. You get very focused on the task at hand, and then when you walk out of the lab at the end of the day it hits you – the thought of what we were doing in there."

Chisels and cutting instruments, including power saws, are necessary to access parts of the body, leaving little room for timidity. The sounds of tools and group discussion may serve to create another layer of distraction from the work being done.

"It was odd or awkward to be using a power saw, but it didn't really feel traumatic to me," Powell said. "It had more of a surgical feel than anything."

