



COLIN HACKLEY

RESPECTFULLY YOURS

Before he allows new students in the anatomy lab, Professor Lynn Romrell wants them to know more about the people who donated their bodies to support medical education. So he reads them some of the letters he has received from family members over the years.

“I want the students to realize that these are real people who really did carefully consider their donation of the body. I want the students to realize this is a thoughtful gift,” Romrell said.

“Then we have to detach. When we go in and start dissecting, you can’t be focusing on ‘This is somebody’s mom, dad, brother...’”

Only about two-tenths of 1 percent of people who die in Florida donate their bodies to the Anatomical Board of the State of Florida for use in medical schools.

The board evenly distributes available bodies, and donors may choose the destination school if they wish. Romrell’s course in the summer of 2009 had 21 bodies, ranging in age at time of death from 56 to 99.

The students aren’t the only ones who have to detach personal feelings from the work at hand. In 25 years as director of the anatomical board, Romrell frequently knew donors before they passed away.

“Sometimes I’ll talk to these people, off and on, through many years as they are considering donating their body,” he said. “And sometimes when the body arrives, their family members want to be sure that you realize who this is.

“One of the major concerns of family members – some of whom didn’t want Dad to donate his body or Mom to donate her body – is they want you to realize this is a real person who meant a lot to them. Frequently in the letters they’ll say, ‘Please show them some respect.’”

Fostering respect begins with Romrell reading the letters. He also limits what students know about the donors to age, sex, occupation and cause of death. Only Romrell knows the whole story.

One donor was a former student.

“He was so intent that, even in his death, people would learn,” Romrell said. “I made sure that that body was in the lab where I was working. It was just my own statement of respect – that this decision was made.”

An 18-year-old who worked in Romrell’s lab before dying in an accident also became a donor.

“The students had a very difficult time dealing with someone who was basically their peer. That was very hard,” he said. “When you’re working on a body and it’s somebody who was 93 years old, it’s easier to detach from that emotion. When it’s younger people, it’s much harder.”

On several occasions, the donors have been husband and wife, where one spouse died not long after the other. In each case, Romrell ensured that the couples remained side by side on adjacent dissection tables throughout the course.

More information about body donation is available at the anatomical board’s website: <http://www.med.ufl.edu/anatbd/>