

## **The Impact of a Gross Anatomy Curriculum With Donor Family Interaction: Thematic Analysis of Student Letters to Silent Mentors**

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Abstract

### **Purpose**

Tzu Chi University's anatomy curriculum incorporates interaction with donors' families and regards body donors as silent teachers and altruistic role models. In this silent mentor program (SMP), students learn about their donor's life before dissection to better appreciate the selfless donation. This study explores the influence of the program on students' humanistic literacy based on student letters to silent mentors, which students wrote near the end of the program and laid by the silent mentor during the coffining ceremony.

### **Method**

The study included 125 letters from third-year medical students who took the gross anatomy curriculum in academic years 2015, 2016, and 2017. With student consent, the program collated and published the letters in the open-access SMP yearbook. Using thematic analysis, the authors manually analyzed the letters in their original Mandarin, with the names of students made anonymous to ensure the authors were blind to students' identity throughout the study.

### **Results**

The analysis identified 3 themes and 11 subthemes. Theme 1, my silent mentor, included 3 subthemes: life characteristics, altruistic attitude, and expectation of offering body. Theme 2, connection to silent mentor and family, included 4 subthemes: intersubjective bonding, emotive first encounter, spiritual communication, and encouragement from silent mentor. Theme 3, reflection and transformation, included 4 subthemes: reflection on life and death, professional self-expectation, inner transformation, and feedback action.

### **Conclusions**

The findings suggest that interactions with donors' families increased students' appreciation of the donation and enhanced students' humanistic literacy. Further, the letters seem to indicate that the SMP inspired students to develop a grateful, respectful, and empathic attitude toward life and their career. Thus, by implementing similar programs, gross anatomy curricula could go beyond the acquisition of structural knowledge to the cultivation of medical students' humanistic literacy.