NURSING STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS REGARDING AUTOPSY EXPERIENCES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Objectives:

- Recognize why the study was performed
- Appreciate the potential value of viewing an autopsy
- Identify how this qualitative study was performed and results were collected
- Grasp how various characteristics of the deceased person can affect the students’ perceptions
- Acknowledge the stages of autopsy viewing that lead to greater understanding of anatomy, physiology, pathology and pathophysiology
Why study autopsies?
How are they valuable?

- Traditionally important educational tool
- Fewer autopsies performed currently across U.S.
  - Virtual autopsies
- Hidden curriculum
- Valuable for practice – nurses and physicians
- Advanced Practice Nurses
- Experiential learning tool
  - Hands-on
  - Spatial learning

Design and Methods of Autopsy Research Study

- Convenience sample (med surg 1 course, mostly female, mostly Caucasian, many of them are 19-21 years old)
- Qualtrics, anonymous
- Commonly occur over 1-1.5 hours
- Voluntary event
- The pathologist encourages students to visualize, hold, examine, feel and discuss organs/ tissues/ vessels
- Students provided with brief history of deceased
  - Some discussion of lifestyle choices and impact on deceased
Results and Findings

Question 1: Did you experience any unusual or unexpected feelings, emotions, ideas before, during or after autopsy?

Themes: excited, overwhelmed, and sad

(Noted that deceased person’s life choices impacted student’s feelings about deceased during autopsy)
I went in thinking I would have trouble avoiding thoughts about the person that passed and the life the person must has led before he or she died. I also knew that I would struggle coping with suicides due to my own religious beliefs. During the autopsy, the policeman gave me the backstory on the deceased, and he did in fact commit suicide. My biggest struggle was thinking about this person’s after-life in relation to my religious beliefs. Seeing his face also made me feel like I knew him after receiving his backstory and knowing that he was only 26 years old. My emotions after the autopsy has stayed consistent with the emotions I had during and before.
I almost started crying for the man when they began. I couldn’t stop thinking about the way he was a living person days before and how real it all was. I felt bad that this is what his life came down to, being cut open on a table all alone in a small room in a hospital. I felt so bad for him and that because of the way he probably died that it almost made me perceive him to be a bad person, when in reality he could have been a wonderful person.
Question 2
What did you learn?

■ Themes: anatomy, textbook, color, size, organ texture

■ I learned what all the organs actually looked like instead of looking at the book. I am able to visualize where everything is located on a patient—when they are in post op. I will have a better idea of what the problem could be when a patient is telling me they have RUQ pain.

■ seeing what the body parts really look like in the body compared to textbooks were amazing. I really think it helped me understand the human anatomy better by seeing what it realistically looks like.

■ I learned a lot about nerves during the autopsy. It was also nice to see the colors of the organs so vibrant, as well. It was very different from the cadavers and it gave me a much better idea of what the body’s internal anatomy looks like.
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Question 3: Would you recommend this to others? Why or why not?

- All participants recommended the experience to their peers!
- I learned about weight, appearance, structural components, functioning, abnormalities, location and texture of so many structures. I feel like I can apply this to my career by understanding the structures that I am penetrating needles into and how easy it can be to blow a vein. If I take my education further (which this makes me want to do), I think I will be much more prepared than other students without the experience.
I would definitely recommend this experience to others. It really helped to put knowledge from textbooks into reality. You can read about all the organs, and see images of them. But it is completely different to see them in real life. This is an opportunity that is not very often given. I am so thankful for it, and would suggest anyone do it if they had the chance.
Question 4: how can you apply the knowledge you have acquired?

I really learned a lot about the anatomy of the body, and just seeing it all laid out very clearly for me to see in the autopsy. I got a much better idea of where every system was laid out and how each piece functioned with the rest of the body. Understanding how the medicine I give as a nurse effects these different systems is even more important to me now after seeing them and comprehending just how fragile they all are. It’s such a shock at first, but once you realize the beauty of all these different and complex functions of the body working to give a person life and how easily it can all be stopped once the heart stops beating, it really creates a humble feeling.....
Overall, I learned that in nursing I need to be understanding, empathetic and compassionate of people with drug addictions or a different background as me. Also, I learned to be objective in some situations and not allow myself to be consumed by sympathy. Lastly, I think I have a better understanding now of anatomy and how the body is all interconnected.
Limitations of the Study

- May be bias present related to discussion prior to filling out on-line survey
- No way to perform member-check to validate comments due to anonymous survey
- We used a convenience sample, more robust if more diverse participant population
  - quantitative and qualitative instruments
  - Include another university?
Conclusion

- Autopsies are invaluable learning tools
- Better understanding of anatomy, physiology, pathology, and pathophysiology