

Chancellor Dr Michael Chaney

Vice Chancellor Prof Dawn Freshwater

Head of School, Prof Shane Maloney

Special guests and relatives of donors from the Western Australian Community

University colleagues from this and other Western Australian Universities

Staff and students from the School of Human Sciences at UWA

I respectfully acknowledge that we are on **Whadjuk Noongar Boodjar** and in keeping with the tradition of the University, would like to pay my respects to all Noongar people and elders, both past and present.

I feel deeply honoured and humbled to deliver this address today on behalf of my colleagues and the past and present students benefiting from the body donation program. Today, we have a unique opportunity to not only pay our respects but also to convey our admiration and gratitude to the many individuals who have made the most precious offering; the gift of themselves to advance scientific knowledge and understanding of the intricacies of the human body. We also celebrate the perpetual value of that selfless gift with their family and friends.

In preparing my address, I was trying to recall my own experiences of involvement in a similar service during my medical school education. Whilst I have strong memories of the precious hours I spent with our donors, I was somewhat disturbed to realise that memories of a thanksgiving service were non-existent; indeed, I attended my first Donor Memorial Service only 3 years ago after joining the then School of Anatomy, Physiology and Human Biology, now the School of Human Sciences, at UWA. The profound personal impact of that first service was such that I was moved to understand why I had not previously had such an opportunity to pay my respects to the donors that so influenced my career.

Body dissection has formed the basis of scientific and medical learning for more than two millennia – records of this practice date back to around 300 BC. Whilst ceremonies such as this one are now common around the world, the use of formal ceremonies to acknowledge body donors actually date back to the 15th century in Italy when public dissections were performed. It seems, however, that by the end of the 1400s, the practice of formally acknowledging the bodies used in dissection gradually became less common.

Reinstatement of such ceremonies is actually a relatively recent event. The first memorial ceremony of the modern era was held in England in 1965, with the practice spreading to American medical schools in the 1970s. However, it was only in 1992, just 25 years ago and more than 5 years after I graduated from Medical School, that the first Australian or New Zealand Thanksgiving Service took place at the University of Queensland, my undergraduate alma mater. Thus for me, also, today is a very precious first opportunity to formally express my personal gratitude for the donors who gave so willingly to assist my learning.

I would like to reflect, briefly, on the experiences that I had with body donors in my university education, and those of today's student for they are similar and yet different.

At the age of 18, we were about to meet perhaps the most valued teachers of our medical degree. Our book list for the year had included the purchase of a human skeleton, which was a revered study companion throughout the first semester. Those skeletons became our teachers as we learnt the names of bones, understood the differing nature of joints, and appreciated the role of each bone in human form and function, regardless of size or location. For many students, this first introduction to the human body was perhaps a preparation in part for the second semester experience of body dissection. As we progressed

into this unknown, we were counselled about the value of the gift we were being given, and the vital importance of respecting our donors. In retrospect, this was truly our first lesson about professionalism in practice.

Nothing however could have fully prepared us for that first day. Mixed impressions come back to me in recall – purchasing my dissection instruments – those very first instruments of my profession. Then there was the nervous anticipation of that first meeting with the body of the person to which my group were assigned, admixed with the unfamiliar and initially overwhelming fumes of formalin, which was the key preservative in use at the time.

We were reluctant to make the first cut, reflecting in part, the extra time that each of us needed to come to terms with and to start our journey towards making sense of those two words that have since bracketed my clinical and scientific career – life and its total antithesis, death. For as physicians, our job is not only to preserve life, but also to ease the pain of those who have reached the end of their journeys. That period of reflection also gave us time to consider the enormity of the selfless and noble choice that our donors had made. For me, it was also the start of the realisation that a seamless blending of our clinical expertise with acknowledgment of our vulnerabilities and imperfections as humans was essential not only to the practice of my chosen craft, but also to make sense and to navigate, the at times emotionally draining professional challenges I would face in the years ahead.

As we embarked on our first task, and made that first very nervous incision into human flesh, I found myself thinking about the person with whose body I was entrusted. We were embarking on a journey of discovery together.

So much separated us:

I was young, whereas she was old.

I was living, whereas she had lived.

I was fearful, whereas she seemed at peace.

My life was yet full of dreams, but her life was complete.

We were strangers to each other: and yet, her still lifeform was in our hands, symbolic of the inextricable bond that would link us forever more.

Coming to understand her seemed to be a challenge almost too great to attempt; yet doing so seemed almost as important as the dissection task ahead.

Against the wisdom of the time, we gave her a name, Lucy – and this simple act helped to establish the relationship that we developed. Over the months ahead, together, we touched Lucy's scars, inside and out, and through the study of her body, gained some small insights into the story of her life. We learned so much about the amazing secrets, variations and intricacies of the human body. We shared so much, and yet I knew so little, for Lucy, at this most intimate point of her life, still kept her soul and her spirit to herself.

The value of this dissection experience was profound and the lessons learned seemed endless. For not only did we learn about anatomy and the importance of respect, teamwork, dedication to task, responsibility and competence, but also of the value of life, of courage and beauty, compassion, equality, generosity, and the potential strength of this tie between generations. As students, we valued every precious moment we spent with our respective donors, often staying in the lab well beyond the end of class, so as not to leave with a task unfinished, whilst aiming to complete it to the very best of our ability. The experience we gained not only having an early influence in subsequent career pathway choices, but also playing a role in the management of many hundreds and thousands of patients for whom we would later provide care.

The humility, compassion and understanding gained from this first substantive exposure to human frailty and vulnerability, also influencing how I would later work with families coming to terms with the grief of losing a loved one. At the same time, perhaps, it also established the foundations of a lifelong drive to understand how to diagnose, prevent or reduce the impact of disease.

It is fair to say that education of students across the anatomical sciences has progressed substantially since that time. Preserving agents have improved, laboratories have better ventilation, and student dissection has been replaced by the use of prosections; purpose focused exhibits prepared by experienced technicians. Studies in the prosection lab are complemented by the availability of 3D computer learning programs.

Nonetheless, the humbling experience of appreciating the variability in form and function that is such an integral part of what makes us human, and which comes from exposure to the human body, remains perhaps one of the most precious and life-changing teaching experiences a student may have. In Western Australia these experiences benefit not only our future doctors, but also our dentistry, podiatry, physiotherapy, and anatomy students, as well as furthering scientific research across the breadth of our State's tertiary institutions.

These experiences go to the primary purpose of universities – dedication to not only the pursuit and dissemination of understanding, but also to the creation of humanity. Which is to say that we aim not only to train future workers or highly knowledgeable citizens, but also to ensure that those citizens who emerge from our walls are the responsible inheritors and fellows of human civilisation, and that humankind will be the ultimate benefactor of this process.

In that sense, today more than ever, the generous and selfless gift of body donation represents the most precious of gifts – the gift that keeps us grounded, the gift that develops those complete human beings, the gift that keeps giving.

Thus, today, also, we come together as one; families and friends, students and staff, clinicians and scientists, united by a profound connection and desire to honour and salute the memory of your loved ones – those who truly have chosen to outlive themselves.

Through this service we acknowledge your pain and your deep sense of loss, be it acute or long-standing. Whilst we cannot diminish your heartache and sorrow, we trust that you sense the enormity of the debt that we owe to your loved ones, and see and feel the enduring gratitude of the wider West Australian academy to each and every one of you for respecting their final wishes. We hope and trust that you find comfort, peace, and perhaps some closure through understanding the enduring inspiration imparted by that most courageous and gracious of acts.

I would like to leave you with a short poem by an unknown author that so beautifully sums up the value of this most quintessential quality of humanity, the giving of oneself to aid another.

*It is now time for me to move on,
Into the dusk, but also the dawn.
I will remain as the morning comes,
As I've left behind a gift for someone.
So another may walk, may talk, may see,
Where their life was locked, I offered a key.
I am a donor to someone in need,
My final gift, my final deed.*

Author Unknown