

## Project

# Anatomy: back in the public spotlight

"I profess to learn and to teach anatomy not from books but from dissections, not from the tenets of Philosophers but from the fabric of Nature." So wrote the eminent English physician William Harvey in the 17th century. Whilst the importance of learning anatomy from real human specimens is something that is currently taken for granted in medical teaching, human bodies are rarely used for educational purposes outside of medicine. But is it really only clinically qualified medics who benefit from a thorough working knowledge of human anatomy based on practical exposure to anatomical material? What about all those people who engage in personal or professional activities in which a sound understanding of human form and function is required? Should members of the public, too, not be able to learn anatomy using the "fabric of Nature"?

As professional anatomists who teach undergraduates and postgraduates at the University of Edinburgh's Medical School, we and our colleagues are repeatedly asked by members of the public to provide anatomy courses for them. We find it hard to come up with a counter-argument when, for example, a practising physiotherapist complains that she spends a huge amount of her time helping patients deal with musculoskeletal problems, but that her knowledge of the underlying anatomy of the musculoskeletal system comes largely from studying schematic illustrations in textbooks, or plastic models. We think there is a clear case in favour of opening up anatomy education to the wider public, with direct relevance to a broad spectrum of professions and backgrounds, including nursing, sports therapy, anthropology, archaeology, and art.

Our response to this situation has been to develop a series of public anatomy workshops, delivered by a team of experienced academics.

Our aim is to allow people who have reason to learn more anatomy to do so legally, safely, and with the right level of instruction, in an expert environment with access to human material.

Despite putting in place a range of important measures to ensure the educational, legal, and moral integrity of the workshops, the initial media response focused almost entirely on historical, darker, and more macabre aspects of anatomy education. Harking back to the days of Burke and Hare still seems to stir the public imagination, creating an impression of anatomy and the use of cadaveric material that couldn't be further from the controlled environment of a modern anatomy teaching laboratory.

**"Should members of the public, too, not be able to learn anatomy using the 'fabric of Nature'?"**

The decision to include human anatomical material as part of the teaching methods to be used in our workshops—integrated alongside medical imaging technology, modern 3D visualisation, and anatomical models—was not one that was taken lightly. However, we feel (much like

William Harvey did) that the use of human anatomical material remains the best way to teach the form and function of the human body, and if we fail to include access to this material in our workshops, it would weaken their educational impact. This approach does, of course, require us to pay careful attention to the emotional needs of people attending the workshops when they are seeing this material for the first time. However, our experience tells us that viewing carefully prepared human anatomical material in a teaching environment constitutes an activity that engages the intellect and stirs fascination, rather than triggering more negative emotional responses. By making the "fabric of Nature" available to members of the public for educational purposes, in an environment where dignity and respect for the donors remains paramount, we hope to bring an appreciation and understanding of the human body to a new audience.

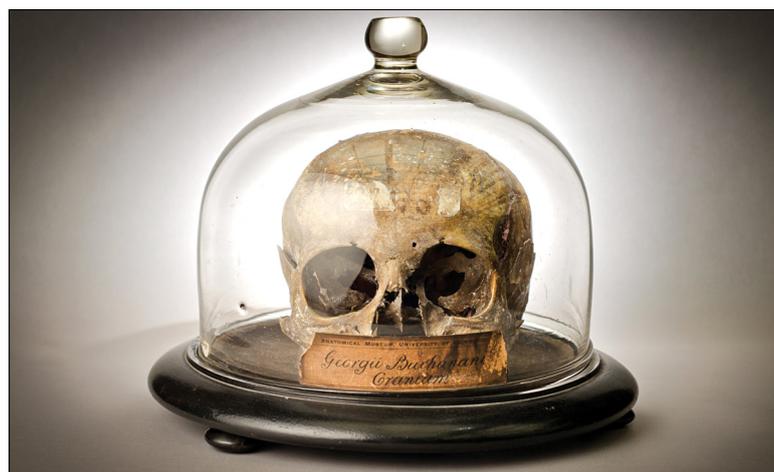
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**Public Anatomy Workshops**  
Anatomy, College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

A series of workshops will run until Nov 14, 2015, on: the lower limb; nervous system and back; chest; abdomen and pelvis; and head and neck  
<http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/biomedical-sciences/anatomy/public-anatomy>



Skull of George Buchanan, tutor to King James VI Scotland and founder of the University of Edinburgh, on display in the university's Anatomy Museum