

# What a Difference 30 Years Makes!

• Ingrid Sevels, DDS, BA •

© J Can Dent Assoc 2004; 70(4):223-4

September 1967. My head swims. I read our course list for Dentistry. I will study Histology, Pathology, Physiology, Microbiology, Pharmacology and the ancient science of Anatomy, where people learn about people by dissecting muscles, nerves, veins, arteries, bones and ligaments of dead people. In first-year, first-day Anatomy lecture, we listen to our professor Dr. James McQuaig:

“Have respect for your cadaver. Don’t throw body pieces you dissect in the garbage. You will share your cadaver with the med students. Meds will start with the upper abdomen. We in Dentistry will start with the head and neck. Make sure you wrap up the body with the formaldehyde wrappings when you finish. Otherwise, it will dry out and become brittle. You will have difficulty dissecting the hands, feet, face and genitalia.”

No one told me I would be one of 5 women in a class of 150 men. No one told me I would work on dead people. No one told me there were few kindred spirits to whom I could run and yell *Help* because the class before had 2 female students and the one before that had none and the class before that had just one. No one told me how to respond when male classmates and instructors asked, “Why are you here?” or said, “You are taking the place of a man. Your education will be wasted. You will just get married.” No one told me. I didn’t think to ask.

On the way to Anatomy Lab after our lecture, the 5 women — Helle, Rina, Lea, Stephanie and I — walk in a huddle and chatter about the weight and cost of our books, about *Grants Atlas of Anatomy* and *Grants Handbook for Dissectors*. “I hope we women can all be in the same group,” says Stephanie. As we hang up our coats, our Anatomy professor gathers us together before we enter the roomful of cadavers. I hear my name called: “Sevels, Sellor, Seymour, Stanley and Smith will form group 8, table 35.” I pull on a white lab coat, smile and wave goodbye to my new friends, soon to be best friends, old friends, friends for life, as we will phone each other anytime, anywhere for anything.

I follow the 4 guys in my group. We enter a room the size of a small gymnasium with windows from floor to ceiling and partially drawn Venetian blinds. I gaze through the windows and see people walking along College Street. Streetcars glide by conveying passengers who sit and read books or newspapers or hold bags of groceries on their lap on their way home to cook dinner.

I smell embalming fluid. Later we learn to smoke or to just burn a cigarette, because the smoke partially obliterates the smell. My group approaches shiny, stainless steel table 35, with a shapeless body laid out, draped in a black plastic tarp. I stand with my group in silence. We don’t know each other’s first names. I don’t remember the last names.

We stand around the table and pull on rubber gloves. Someone in my group lifts the heavy plastic wrap. Someone tugs on the pale-yellow, formaldehyde-soaked wrapping and unwinds it from around the head. Another student opens the dissectors’ handbook to Chapter 6 — the well-thumbed pages remain fat-stained even 30 years later — entitled “The Head and Neck, the Front of the Skull and the Face.” We all stare at the face. Grey, mushroom fungus non-colour. Is the cadaver male or female? We won’t know until we get to the dissection of the genitals and the instructor makes sure to point out the glans clitoridis to the guys. This is a person — or this *was* a person. What did this person die of? Did the deceased donate his or her body to science or was this — as rumours circulated — an unidentified, unclaimed street person in their final resting place, complete with toe tag and 7-digit number?

We stare. Then someone picks up the scalpel, the one with the blunt end for scrapping bone. I feel the stare of 8 eyes and I look from the cadaver’s face and see an outstretched hand, handing me the scalpel.

I look at the eyes from face to face to face. I try to remember Dr. McQuaig’s lecture voice. I take the scalpel.

*“Hold the scalpel between your thumb and index finger like a pen. Rest your fourth finger on the surface you are cutting. A finger rest will avoid slippage.”*

I hold the scalpel like a pen and place the tip of the blade in the forehead, at the hairline, on the midline of the face.

*“Cut only through the skin layer. Don’t cut deep. You don’t want to feel bone.”*

I draw the blade down towards the top of the nose. I press lightly on the handle of the blade. I apply more pressure to cut through the leathery skin. Yellow embalming formaldehyde oozes.

*“Cut around the eye carefully. The skin is flabby. Angle your blade sideways so you don’t touch the eyeball.”*

I turn the blade sideways and it encircles the eye. I draw my blade back to the bridge of the nose. Then I draw the blade down the middle of the nose. I press too hard and feel the bone underneath the blade. My blade reaches the top of the lip.

*“Cut carefully around the mouth. You don’t want to cut the muscles of expression, the levator labii superioris for smiling and the depressor labii inferioris for grimacing. You will have to clean the fat off these muscles and identify the insertion points. Note the direction of the fibre bundles.”*

I draw the blade sideways around the margin of the upper lip and around the corner of the mouth, along the margin of the lower lip, back to the midline down the chin, around the chin to the neck, and down the neck to the Adam’s apple.

*“Peel the skin off like an orange. Grab the flap with your thumb and forefinger. If the skin peels off too easily, you have cut too deep. If the skin peels off with difficulty, you have not cut deep enough.”*

I finish the slit to the throat. I lay the scalpel on the chest of my cadaver. I turn and walk to the exit and then walk faster and run through the doors and out to the hall and through another door with a washroom symbol on it until I reach a urinal and hang there and vomit till I can only retch and I walk past the other urinals with people hanging over them and to the sink and wash and scrub my hands, splash my face and I sure wish I had perfume and wish that I sat on the streetcar on College Street and I walk out of the washroom and back through the doors, back into the Anatomy Lab.

The face is no longer a face. I see muscles, nerves, arteries, veins and bones. Someone dissects and cleans the muscles of expression. I stand and watch expressionless.

### **Class of 2001**

Some 30 years later, at a wedding on a soft summer’s evening, I sit and sip wine and chat with Andrew, a 2001 dentistry grad.

I tell Andrew how I felt in first-year, first-day Anatomy. Andrew listens. He laughs and says, “Do you want to hear about mine?”

“Yes,” I say.

“My Anatomy professor said our first task would be to remove a head from a body,” Andrew related. “My class was

made up of 60 students — 30 males and 30 females — and I was the only male in a group with 4 women.”

In the Anatomy Lab, Andrew uncovered his cadaver.

The 4 female students handed him the bone saw and said:

“We’re going for coffee. Call us when you’re finished.” ♦



*Dr. Sevels practises dentistry in Oakville, Ontario.*

*Correspondence to: Dr. Ingrid Sevels, 181 Church Street, Oakville, ON L6J 1N3. E-mail: [Ingrid.sg@cogeco.ca](mailto:Ingrid.sg@cogeco.ca).*

*The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or official policies of the Canadian Dental Association.*