

Editorial

James V. Felicetta, MD
Editor-in-Chief

Dead Bodies at a State Fair? Please!

I was absolutely appalled when I first heard of the concept several years back. It seemed that certain entrepreneurial showmen had assembled traveling road shows of human bodies posed in various playful positions, such as riding a bicycle or bouncing a basketball. These deceased individuals had been procured under unknown circumstances and then partially dissected and laminated with special chemical preparations that allowed them to remain preserved indefinitely. This meant they were forced by a cruel and uncaring universe to bounce a ball eternally or, worse yet, to display one's bones or blood vessels in perpetuity.

The thought of using dead bodies as a form of entertainment for the masses struck me as nothing short of grotesque. The idea that someone's parent or favorite uncle might be permanently displayed in a whimsical pose just to satisfy the general public's insatiable need for lurid entertainment seemed both sad and totally unacceptable by any moral standard. I also had unpleasant flashbacks to my largely unhappy days in the cadaver lab in medical school.

Back in medical school I was forced to spend many hours inhaling formaldehyde vapors while carving up a cadaver that was assigned to me and 3 of my medical school colleagues. We worked diligently for more than a month cutting away, bit by bit, at the cadaver's innards, only to have to start all over again with a different cadaver. The decision was made by our instructors that our cadaver had undergone so many major surgeries in life that her anatomy was hopelessly distorted. So we soldiered on with a new cadaver, struggling mightily to distin-

guish blood vessels from nerves and from other hollow, tubular structures. Everything was the same sickening faded flesh color, such that it was next to impossible to tell one structure from another. (However, I do recall a perverse moment of levity. One of my fellow students discovered that our new cadaver had a glass eye that could be readily removed from its socket. He

*The thought of using
dead bodies as a form
of entertainment for
the masses struck me
as nothing short of
grotesque.*

surreptitiously removed it and embedded it into the bladder wall. He then summoned our very officious teaching assistant to help identify a strange bladder lesion. This poor gentleman recoiled quite comically when he bent close to open the bladder only to find a wide-open eye staring back at him!)

Given what I've already told you, you can imagine my reaction when I learned very recently that a version of the traveling cadaver show would be appearing as a featured attraction this year at the Arizona State Fair. This was really and truly beyond the pale! Fairgrounds are typically crude assemblages of garish carnival rides and biggest-pumpkin displays, operated by hucksters trying to lure the gullible into seemingly easy but actually nearly impossible games of skill, such as the ring toss or the magic basketball

throw. What an outrage to think that the deceased people who have unwittingly become a part of some traveling peep show are now on display among such a midst! Buy a funnel cake or a chocolate-covered scorpion and then oggle the dead man who now pedals his bicycle for your personal entertainment!

So that's where I stood philosophically when I agreed, somewhat reluctantly, that I would take my 3 teenage daughters to the fair. (I also have 2 sons and a steadfast wife who have in common an abhorrence for all things related to the state fair.) My daughters weren't looking to spend a pleasant afternoon with Dear Old Dad. They really just wanted me to pay their entrance fees to the fair and then bankroll them with enough moola for a good time. Their goal was to fill their bellies with junk food and then hurl out those same cheap meals after a quick turn on the Tilt-a-Whirl or some other nauseating phantasmagoria of pulsating motion and swirling neon. Once there, the girls headed out and left me to my own lonely devices.

Although I tried to resist, I was inevitably driven to plunk down \$5 to secure my entry to the dissected cadaver show. You can probably anticipate what happened next. I found the show to be absolutely phenomenal and educational beyond belief. From the moment I saw the first dissection of an old gentleman serenely pedaling his bicycle, I was enchanted at the fantastic job of dissection and display.

I mentioned before how virtually impossible it was to get a clean anatomic dissection in the misery of the medical school cadaver lab. What I witnessed now were phenomenally brilliant dissections that illustrated



anatomy so well that I almost wept at the beauty of the displays and of the human body itself. These were the most skilled and capable dissections I had ever seen in my entire life. I wound up spending much longer than the average fairgoer, lingering at each display, testing myself with the various numbered arrows and keys to see whether I knew what exact piece of human anatomy I was looking at. I'm proud to report that I knew most of the structures without having to look

at the key, but certainly not all of them. After all, these were far more skillful dissections than I had ever encountered. I especially marveled at the internal ossicles of the ear in one display. I had no idea beforehand that these bones are so intricate and delicate, and above all, so tiny. That display alone was worth the price of admission.

So you get the point. I was proven really, really wrong in my assumptions about such a show. It's a bad pun to say that I was dead wrong, but clearly,

I was. I was left with a new sense of wonderment over the miracle of the human body and with a newfound respect for the need to take really good care of it; not only my own body, but also the many patients who trust me with their care. I hope that many of you will one day have the opportunity to enjoy such a show if it comes your way. It was really a humbling revelation for this cynical and jaded moralist who thought he knew what was appropriate and what was not. ●

In this issue and now online at www.fedprac.com:

Menopause: The Special Needs of Women in the Federal Health Care System

Proceedings from a clinical roundtable

**The latest trends in managing vasomotor symptoms and
tips for educating patients in this growing population.**

Supported by Teva Women's Health, Inc.
112199