

Transcript for Interview – Army Aam

Courteney: Today I am meeting with a 4th year Medical student to get a student's perspective on the Body Donation Program and the impact that it has on learning.

Army: Hi everyone, my name is Army. I am a 4th year Medical student and the class president for the UBC Medical class of 2023. I am looking forward to be chatting about the Body Donor Service at UBC.

Courteney: Thank you so much for meeting with me today. I just wanted to start with one question: what was your introduction to the body donation program?

Army: So, my first experience with the body donation program actually wasn't at UBC, it was at McGill during my undergrad. So I had a bit of a sneak peek into that sphere, into that I guess, realm of influence before I started medical school, which I think is a bit unique.

And it's a bit of a shock, I think is the best way to describe it, when you first enter the cadaver lab and you see the bodies, and you realize that you're about to learn so much and interact. And you have a really heightened responsibility because you are working with someone who was once alive, and nonetheless still have to treat with the utmost respect, while still learning from your peers, from your instructors, from each other. It's a bit of a shock.

So when I came to you UBC and once I was interacting with the donations, with the bodies, I think it was, it still is, a bit of a shock because you are reminded of the sacrifice in the donation that's been made, but also what you're here to do and what you're here to learn. It's a very special experience.

Courteney: So as a student, what is the difference between learning from a body, as opposed to a textbook or an artificial model?

Army: There's really no comparison. Once again because I've done anatomy in my undergrad I have a long-standing history, and I've worked with a lot of textbooks, I work with a lot of flash cards, I've worked with like cross section models, I've worked with everything. And there are 2 things: first of all, from an anatomical perspective, you can never really appreciate all the different layers and all the different like the fascia, and how the organs interact with one another, and all these different pieces really come into play beautifully with a donor. It's much more realistic, and it really allows you to learn better because you're like this is what I'm seeing in a donor, and this is what I'll see in real life when I'm practicing as a physician or a surgeon or whatever all you might play. So I think that's a big, big difference.

The other piece is certainly the, maybe the less tangible learning you get, so for many people, myself included, this is the first time you are interacting with a patient, with a body, with someone that has a history of experiences, and has lived a long life. I think you learn a lot in

that process on how to be respectful to those individuals, how to be respectful with your peers, and I think that's the first moment, at least in Medical school, where I have a heightened responsibility in society, and a position of privilege, and with that comes certain responsibilities and expectations, and that's when you first get to practice that.

I think needless to say you cannot get that from a textbook or from a virtual module or anything like that.

Courteney: During COVID-19, I know there was a decrease in people signing up to become donors. Did that impact your educational experience?

Army: I think it did. Kudos to the UBC Faculty of Medicine for really, especially the anatomy program, really coming out of the gates strong with alternative methods of learning, like digital atlases of human anatomy, a lot of the anatomy staff would go into the lab to take pictures, of like, a specific muscle group or nerves, so that you could at least get some of that learning. But without being able to go into the laboratory, and like work with the donors ourselves, I certainly felt like I was missing out.

So then losing that in second year was, I think even a bit more notable because the anatomy gets a bit more complex. I felt like I wasn't getting the same depth of learning that I would have if I could actually be interacting with them myself.

Courteney: So it's almost like you're learning without one of your senses, in a way. You don't have the sense of touch. That must have been really challenging.

Army: Absolutely. It was, and it's you know it still is because the anatomy is very complex, there's a lot of like vasculature, there's a lot of nerves. And the challenge really is, is that it's not just good enough to know, at least for me, I find it unsatisfying to know what they're called, and where they roughly are in space. Especially nerves, for example, like they start somewhere, and they wrap around different things, and all these very specific positing pieces that when you're actually in the OR, for example, and you're working with a surgeon, you, yeah I know what it's called but when you're trying to like visualize it in space, I don't have that. Because I haven't been able to see it before.

Courteney: So what do you think would happen if people just stopped donating their bodies?

Army: I think it would really change the way medical education is delivered. I think for a long time and for good reason, body donors have been a crucial aspect of medical education. Because you really can't get that training elsewhere, that experience elsewhere. So losing as it transiently happened during COVID-19, losing that educational piece and what might happen if we were no longer able to get more donors. You're looking at UBC alone, that's three hundred medical students almost, three hundred medical students who have, not a deficit, but a lack of experience in a very fundamentally important piece of our training, like the anatomy. And the intangible stuff I mentioned as well, and in terms of like how to work with patients, how to work

with each other, all that is very important. I certainly feel that without that, the training wouldn't be the same.

Courteney: Respect and dignity are core principles of the body donation program. How have you seen this over the course of your studies, in practice?

Army: I've already mentioned respect earlier because that's really quite a crucial piece. I don't think it is lost on myself or any of my peers what a big donation, and to be honest sacrifice, it is to give one's body to Medical Education. That is a very significant choice.

So I think from the very start respect and dignity are fundamental tenets of the education, and once again, going back to that intangible pieces, we're learning to practice that just as much as we're learning the anatomy. And everyone is very, very cognizant of that fact. That this is a big, big donation and we need to treat it as such. And what I love about the anatomy lab, in particular, is to show respect and dignity, I think in one way, it's obviously to respect the bodies, and to ensure that we're not doing anything with the bodies that would make people feel uncomfortable, or make people feel, you know, if they knew that their family members were in that room was well, they would feel good knowing that they were in safe hands. I think that is one piece that we all kind of practice, because that can be anyone. That can be our family, that can be our parents. So I think that is very important.

In terms of another way to show respect and dignity I guess is the fact that there is a genuine desire and passion to learn. I think the other way we show respect and dignity to the bodies, is by wanting to be there, wanting to learn from the bodies, making the most out of the anatomy sessions, making the most out of the dissections. That is the point. So I think that is important for, I guess, families to know is that this sacrifice is not for nothing. Like we are, all of us are, making the most of the privilege to work and learn from these bodies. I think that's important to highlight.

Courteney: You mentioned it before, but can you tell me about the memorial service that UBC has for the donors?

Army: Yes, so as class president, in my second year, it is as part of my responsibility to run the body donor memorial service. Basically what we do is, we partner up with the anatomy staff, we contact the next of kin for the donors of that year, and we send them an invite to comment, share a moment of respect with us. We often have like a memory wall. So we invite families to send in pictures, to send in quotes, and memories, and whatever they might feel comfortable with and we put those up on display. We have students and faculty members come up and speak about the significance of their family member's donation on our training and in our education, and how important it is to us in the sanctity of life and death. There is so much to reflect on.

Courteney: Yes, I had the privilege to attend the ceremony that happened last month. It really was something, it was really beautiful.

Army: It's a very special experience, it is a very special service, and I think it's an opportunity for the families to really reconnect and celebrate their loved ones.

Courteney: If you could sum up your experience with the body donation program in one word, what would that word be?

Army: One word. The word that comes to mind, is honour. It's been an honour.

Courteney: Thank you so much for sharing the student experience with us. You've given us another perspective that it really demonstrates the importance, and the impact of body donation on education. And this will ultimately benefit the population, as it the students become graduates and become professionals, so we really really appreciate your perspective, so thank you very much.

Army: It was my pleasure, thank you.