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A POST-MORTEM OF AUTOPSY

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Introduction

The post-mortem examination has a long and illustrious history; all the way back to the teaching practices of legendary figures such as da Vinci, Harvey and Vesalius.

Since the 1960's, the use of the post-mortem as an educational tool has been in decline. Gone are the days when autopsies formed an integral part of the university timetable, having been displaced by more contemporary modules on communication skills and medico-legal practices.

Materials & Methods

In order to investigate the breadth and depth of the role of autopsy, the authors used the Medline and Pubmed databases.

Results

By combining "autopsy" and "medical education" search terms, 63 published articles were deemed suitable. The final number of articles reviewed was brought down to 40, after excluding all non-English publications.

The review of the literature reveals the many reasons for this decline including:

- The short length of the pathology course
- Curriculum pressures
- An inability to match the autopsy component to the week's organised teaching
- The logistical pressures of a fully integrated autopsy module
- Too few interesting teachers
- Competing departmental demands and professional responsibilities
- Inadequate training of doctors as to the importance of autopsy as a teaching method

The autopsy remains an incredibly versatile medium for learning within modern medical curricula. Its use serves the dual role of helping students to improve their understanding of pathology, physiology and dissection, whilst also providing them with an appreciation of its value in their future professional practice. In addition, as an auditor of diagnostic error the autopsy again proves its worth.

Conclusion

In light of such a myriad of benefits, the resurgence of educational autopsy would translate into the provision of a greater overall standard of patient care and thus, should be afforded the respect and status it deserves.