

## A deadly lesson

*Jane Johnson, chartered physiotherapist, sports massage therapist and co-director of The London Massage Company, explains how dissecting cadavers provides a unique opportunity for practitioners to explore the musculoskeletal system*



### ***What are cadavers and how can they be used in anatomy and physiology training?***

Cadavers are corpses preserved with formaldehyde, which are donated by people usually for the purposes of dissection. Cadavers can be used for training purposes to help students and qualified practitioners - including doctors, sports massage therapists, bodywork practitioners, physiotherapists and dentists - understand the anatomy and physiology of the human body.

### ***What made you decide to start offering this type of training?***

Dissection was a mandatory component of my physiotherapy training, so I was fortunate enough to have this unique and life-changing experience. I learnt so much from my own training, and I wanted to provide other massage and sports therapists with the opportunity to really understand the human body's anatomy and physiology.

### ***Where are the workshops held?***

The workshops run by The London Massage Company are held in the dissection labs of a central London university.

### ***Could you talk us through what a typical session involves?***

Wearing lab coats and gloves, practitioners start by handling and examining real bones, identifying their names and origin, whilst getting used to the lab environment. Next, therapists are encouraged to refresh their memory about which muscles are attached to the bones, and are challenged to locate these muscles on real specimens.

Workbooks support the training, although some learners prefer to work primarily with these rather than handling the cadavers, choosing instead to examine the many pots around the lab containing specimens such as knees, feet and shoulders.

Throughout the session, the various muscles and bones are discussed in relation to their relevance to therapy work, for example, the consequence of having a downward pointing coracoid process (on the scapula), or a shortened psoas muscle, and how to test for a weak subscapularis muscle.

### ***What are the benefits of cadaver workshops for student and qualified massage and sports therapists?***

Once therapists are able to see the muscles that lie underneath the skin, they can develop a greater appreciation of how their clients' bodies work and respond to treatment.

Muscles can be misrepresented in textbooks and in reality are much thinner (i.e. trapezius), thicker (i.e. teres major and minor), or deeper (i.e. quadratus lumborum and psoas) than some images may suggest. Many therapists are also amazed at the thickness of the skin, and the subcutaneous fat and vessels running through it.

Sports therapists are particularly excited to see knee and shoulder specimens, of which there are many.

### ***How do cadaver workshops benefit over theoretical workshops?***

Some say that experiential learning is the best kind; the more a student can experience anatomy and physiology, the better. Students have reported that attending a cadaver workshop gave them a significant advantage when it came to learning the muscles.

However, different styles of learning suit different people, so the cadaver workshop is not necessarily better, just different.

### ***Are there any limitations when learning through the use of cadavers?***

Yes, the specimens are prepared for the workshops by the lab technicians and trainee surgeons, and this takes many hours of careful dissection, and is costly to prepare and preserve the specimens. It is not always possible to see all of the origins and insertions, especially those that are very deep.

The workshops also involve careful management of the group by the tutor to ensure that everyone feels included, and yet comfortable with how much they choose to participate.

### ***What are the pre-requisites for these workshops?***

Workshop attendees need to be therapists qualified in body massage or are enrolled on a course involving anatomy and physiology.

### ***Is it for the faint-hearted?***

The specimens are preserved and most are 'dry', appearing similar to rubber in appearance and texture. There is no blood, but they are real bodies, and many prosections are used too, that is, whole upper and lower limbs, and whole torsos.

However, everything is presented respectfully and with reverence to those people who have generously donated their bodies, without whom workshops such as this would not be possible.

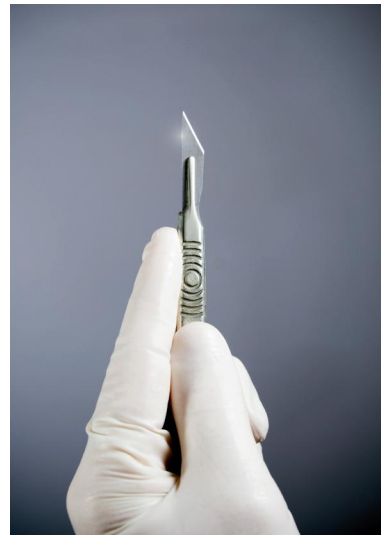
Although some people at first feel nervous, by the end of the day, everyone, without exception, is in awe of what they have experienced and say they will never 'see' anatomy in the same light again.

# A day in the dissection lab

*Sports massage therapists, Nicki Mitchell and Di Jackett, provide a personal account of their experience of a cadaver workshop*

We had talked enthusiastically about wanting to see it all ‘in the flesh’ on various occasions in the past and were therefore very excited to learn that The London Massage Company were offering the opportunity for therapists to partake in a cadaver workshop, ‘Day in the Dissection Lab’.

However, it was fair to say that as the day drew nearer, our previously blasé approach changed to an air of great trepidation. We spoke the evening before on the phone and the conversation touched upon what to wear, with Di’s other half chortling in the background, ‘something red!’ We giggled nervously, rising to near hilarity when Di suggested turning up in one of those glow-in-the-dark skeleton suits, but in the end, we opted for the safe option of our usual sports massage work uniform.



The following morning, having arrived at the venue quite early, we wandered around to check we were in the right place and after a couple of trips to the ladies toilets, found ourselves outside the basement dissection lab. We bravely rang the lab doorbell and a very cheerful lady confirmed we were in the right place, but that ‘it’ wasn’t quite ready yet and suggested we make our way back up to the main reception. We looked at each other nervously, both wondering what she had meant by ‘it’ and scuttled back upstairs, feeling a little queasy from the strange smell coming from the lab.

Gradually, our group began to arrive and it was both lovely (and somewhat comforting) to meet our former sports massage tutor, Jane Johnson, who was leading the cadaver workshop. We descended again to the basement lab where we were asked to put on a lab coat and advised that no food or drink was allowed inside. The earlier nervous giggling was now reduced to a much quieter apprehension as we filed dry-mouthed down the gentle slope into the lab, passing a couple of limb specimens on the way to our seats - our nostrils twitching at the strong smell of the embalming solution.

The day was very well organised and we settled down, workbooks to hand, all ears, to begin our day of learning and exploration. Conscious of some of the groups’ wary glances at the limbs on the stainless steel trolley to our left, Jane eased us in gently by handing around some human scapulae and vertebral columns. Before we knew it, we were embroiled in our fascinating journey around the real human form.

The lab is an amazing place and not at all what we had expected. We had both thought that we would be examining just one body, but it soon became apparent that the lab was stocked with numerous body parts, together with several prosections. Donning our latex gloves and holding our essential oil soaked tissues to our noses (great idea from Di - ever the aromatherapist!), we steadily gained the confidence to delve into the non-textbook version of skin, fascia, muscles, bones, and organs.

From gingerly sidling towards the stainless steel containers housing the cadavers, with some of us girls rather cowardly getting the men to carry out the initial unwrapping and handling, we were soon buzzing back and forth between working through various sections of our workbooks and exploring our subjects. Findings were then shared and discussed with great excitement.

Having decided beforehand to approach the cadavers as merely 'pieces of meat' to ease any potential squeamishness, we found ourselves developing feelings of incredible respect and gratitude to the people who had donated their bodies to the hospital. We were all very careful to wrap the cadavers up just as we had found them, with one or two of us passing a few words of comfort and thanks as we did so.

The ladies who run the two labs so smoothly were incredibly kind and helpful, with nothing being too much trouble as they disappeared into their 'store room' to find appropriate specimens if none were already on display. The day whizzed past and I think most of us were completely blown away by it all and nearing saturation point with the remarkable things we had seen, touched, shared and learned.

We came away feeling utterly privileged and very lucky to have been granted access to such an amazing facility. Sadly, the future for practitioners wishing to benefit from this incredible experience will be extremely limited – the preference now is for surgeons to work on bodies that have been frozen, giving a more 'lifelike' experience. Apparently, we do not currently freeze cadavers in the UK so they are flown over from Germany, making it an expensive exercise that will be limited to the privileged few.

For those therapists who have ever considered spending some time in the dissection lab, we would urge them to do so before the opportunity is lost. It was without doubt a once-in-a-lifetime experience that neither of us would have wanted to miss. Although it may not be to everyone's taste, if you have the stomach for it (and it honestly really isn't that gory or scary), it will change the way you see the human form forever; there really is nothing like the real thing.

With thanks to: Jane Johnson [www.thelondonmassagecompany.com](http://www.thelondonmassagecompany.com) Nicki Mitchell and Di Jackett [www.thesportstherapyco.com](http://www.thesportstherapyco.com)

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