Learning anatomy

Medical students test their limits

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Gross anatomy class is a lot like swimming in the ocean during a storm.

Once your head gets above water for a minute, another giant wave comes crashing over your head and you’re drowning again. That’s how students describe it.

For the past two weeks, the 145 first-year medical students at Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center have learned 2,000 medical terms, began dissecting human cadavers and are preparing for their first seven-hour anatomy exam.

Before the exam

"I’m nervous. I’m extremely nervous," said Kara Ye, 19, a first-year student, while spending extra time in the cadaver lab to prepare for the test.

Rosanna Yang, 30, of California, reads her notes while her group dissects the heart of a human cadaver. The first anatomy exam lasted seven hours. Nineteen students failed to pass.
Zagon said. The lab portion and the written test each count 1/9th of the students' final grade. Many leave that evening, exhausted, having no idea whether they passed or failed.

"This is kind of a wake-up call to a lot of people," Wentling said. Zagon's up from 5 a.m. to 1:30 a.m., because he promises to grade the lab portion of the exam within 24 hours.

Exam results day

The next morning at 7:45, Zagon posts the grades on a bulletin board near the lab doors.

"Nineteen did not pass," he said. One person earned a 92 on the exam. One got a 34. "Some of these kids have a very difficult time."

The medical students needed to earn a 60 to pass. "One got a 58," Zagon said.

Students approach the bulletin board one at a time or lean toward it in groups. Grades are posted anonymously using a number that corresponds to each student.

"This has been an emotional roller coaster," said Alex Lecke, 25, of Washington, Pa., near Pittsburgh. "I almost melted down before the test. I had barely slept in two weeks. I've never been tested on that kind of volume."

He felt like he had earned a 40, but learns he scored an 81.

Candice Blair, 22, of Bowie, Md., approaches the board warily. Graduate students like her must earn an 80 to pass.

She didn't make it. "It's the first test," she said. "I didn't have the system. I'll make it up."

Ammon Larsen, 23, from Logan, Utah, looked his grade, smiled, then looked ahead.

"We can't really relax," he said. "We have to get ready for the next test."

Matt Plotrowski, 22, of Pittsburgh (left), dissects a human heart with Ifeanyi Ilonzo, 23, of New Jersey. "I like it (dissecting cadavers)," Plotrowski said. "I think it's really helpful in learning."

"It's just an overwhelming amount of information you need to take in. It's not just rote memorization; it's understanding the structures and building a 3-D structure in your head, a 3-D human in your head."

Jessica Wentling, 26, a teaching assistant and an anatomy graduate student from Baltimore.

Thursday, Aug. 27, exam day

At 1 p.m., half the students begin a four-hour written exam and the others start the hours-long lab practical exam. Later they switch.

The 72 students rotate silently around the lab from one cadaver to the next. At each table they must follow a white string back to where it's tied around a body part. THEY have just 90 seconds to identify the two body parts at each table. Some parts have long complicated names.

On the written exam, the first question in Part 2 asks about spinal nerves T1-L3, parietal pleura, the dorsal horn, the diaphragm and sympathetic and parasympathetic nerves.

Those just cover the first third of that question. "This was an excruciating day for these kids,"