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NTU to have compulsory cadaver dissection classes for medical students from 2026

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NTU medical students practising cadaver dissection as part of their formal curriculum.

SINGAPORE - Third- and fourth-year students at Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) medical school will get to dissect human cadavers from 2026.

Previously not offered to students at NTU's Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, cadaver dissection will now be a compulsory module for students in their clinical years during the five-year programme.

Associate Professor Sreenivasulu Reddy Mogali, the medical school's head of anatomy, said the school will be importing fresh frozen cadavers from the United States, and will need about nine or 10 cadavers each year.

Although there is increased awareness in Singapore about donating bodies to science, there are not enough cadavers to go around all the medical schools here, he said.

First-year students at Duke-NUS Medical School take a core course with cadaver dissection classes, while the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine offers cadaver dissection as an elective.

Prof Reddy said working with human cadavers provides students with a more accurate understanding of how the human anatomy works, building on their foundational learning in the first two years.

“The human anatomy structure is not exactly what is shown in textbook images. It is quite complex, and no two human bodies are the same in terms of anatomy,” he added.

Prof Reddy was speaking to The Straits Times on July 21 during a pilot lesson at the Surgical Sciences Training Centre at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, where future dissection classes will be held.

The session gave students a preview of how such lessons will be conducted when introduced in 2026.

Dissecting cadavers is useful for all medical students, and not just those who intend to be surgeons, Prof Reddy said.

“If you go to a GP (general practitioner), they would do physical examinations, and might administer injections or insert tubes into the body. So these are all based on anatomical knowledge.”

Dissections also help doctors understand and perform safe clinical procedures, he added.

Unlike traditional cadavers, which have been preserved by formalin and stored for many years, fresh frozen cadavers are able to provide students with real tactile surgical experiences, he said.

Said Prof Reddy: “When formalin is used, the tissue properties will change. They become rigid and hard because they lose their biomechanical properties.”

Acknowledging that dissecting cadavers can be daunting for young students, he said the school eases them into working with real human tissue over time.

In their first and second years, they learn via textbooks, team-based learning discussions, plastinated human specimens – cadavers preserved with silicone-like material – and 3D models.

Prof Reddy said plastinated human specimens have no smell when cut open, and can be reused several times for teaching and learning.

These specimens also come already dissected into smaller parts, he added, although these help students identify individual structures, muscles and bones, and understand their relationships.

“Once they get that foundation, the third level is where they start working with real tissue.”

Fourth-year NTU medical student Shaynna Ee, 21, who dissected her first human cadaver during the pilot lesson on July 21, aspires to be a surgeon.

The experience of dissecting a real body was insightful and provided valuable training, she said.

“We get to truly see the depth of anatomy, like how vessels or ligaments may run one on top of the other, and how muscles truly feel,” she said.

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