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Letter to the Editor

Comments Regarding “the Impact of Body Worlds on Adult Visitors’ Knowledge on Human Anatomy”

To the Editor, *Clinical Anatomy*:

Drs. Fonseca and Finn are to be congratulated on trying to shed some “objective” light on the benefits that might be accrued by visiting Gunther von Hagens’ Body Worlds. When questioned about his motives, von Hagens usually answers that he is concerned to “democratize” anatomy, to confront the viewer with issues relating to mortality, and/or to improve their knowledge about human gross anatomy. The authors of the article also recognize the importance of increasing laypersons’ understanding of anatomy and commendably have attempted the difficult task of assessing whether visits to Body Worlds achieves this goal. The authors rightly draw the reader’s attention to their methodological limitations and I would like to expand on this matter.

It seems to me that trying to ascertain anatomical knowledge by providing questionnaires before and after visiting Body Worlds is fraught with difficulties. First, by providing a questionnaire before the visit one is inviting (perhaps even forcing) the visitor to pay more attention to anatomical knowledge than they might otherwise have done. Second, obtaining questionnaires after the visit can also be problematic in that a person who feels (s)he has gained insufficient knowledge might be reluctant to admit such by handing in a questionnaire while others with more confidence might be eager to contribute and thus bias the findings. There are other ways of investigating this problem and I draw the authors’ attention to a very preliminary study that we carried

out when we took a group of medical and anatomical science students to Body Worlds when it was exhibited in London. A number of us decided just to observe the visitors and it was clear that most essentially skipped the opening exhibits that displayed anatomical knowledge to quickly go to see the “spectaculars” (i.e., the plastinates of humans as if in life: dancing, playing cards, playing sports, etc) where there was no anatomical information available. Because our observations only took place over a single afternoon we did not feel we could publish but I believe that a similar kind of study over a longer period conducted by independent investigators (and without Body Worlds being aware precisely when the investigation would take place) might yield results of interest.

Finally, Drs. Fonseca and Finn have provided most useful suggestions for Body Worlds when they recommend that they should create “a more active learning environment”, use “other methods... to complement the plastinated specimens,” and have “curators available at each Body Worlds event.”

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