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History of anatomical errors in anatomy textbooks and atlases

Ahmet Sinav
Sakarya University, Turkey

Throughout history, anatomical information has been conveyed visually from teacher to student. Even in our modern era with advanced imaging technologies, still no one can imagine an anatomy curriculum without hand illustrated anatomy atlases. The anatomical illustrations in textbooks and atlases are used as self-study materials by students, as slides for lectures, etc. Atlases are especially crucial in countries where cadavers are not readily available for dissection. In such cases, anatomical illustrations provide students the sole point of access to internal structure of the human body. Unfortunately, atlas and textbook illustrations sometimes misrepresent anatomical information. For example, the cover of Gray's Anatomy, the number one reference book in the field of anatomy has several errors such as inaccurate origin of the buccinator muscle, the branching pattern of the facial nerve. The explanations for such inaccuracies are numerous. First, some medical illustrators do not possess sufficient understanding of anatomical details. Second, illustrators may pay more attention to the artistic features of their illustrations than to their anatomic accuracy. Finally and most importantly, medical illustrators often use existing illustrations as resources rather than drawing on observations from actual dissections. This practice propagates errors through generations. Anatomy education can be considered the foundation of medical sciences. Therefore, visual materials must be prepared with painstaking accuracy. Anatomists need to assume responsibility for collaborating illustrators, in order that the mistakes of history may be rectified.

asinav@yahoo.com