day such as the printing press, but he was also wary of their limits. While, for example, he was a pioneer of modern anatomical illustration, which he used heavily in teaching, he saw this only as an aid to learning and teaching, not meant to overtake or substitute the prime mode of instruction — inspection of the human body through dissection. In today’s world, transformed and often overwhelmed by technological advances, Vesalius’s balanced approach is instructive.

Vesalius’s career also sends a warning. Throughout history, dissections of human cadavers have been a double-edged sword of anatomy. On the one hand, they enabled insights into human anatomy, but on the other, the procurement of cadavers has always been surrounded by controversy. Vesalius lived in an era of loose regulations and paucity of cadavers for research and teaching. Most of the bodies he dissected were those of executed criminals and obtained legally. However, Vesalius was also involved in illicit activities (common at the time) in order to obtain human tissue, including grave robbing and stealing human remains from the gallows. The morally dubious and even illegal procurements of cadavers plagued anatomy deep into the 20th century and, in some countries, up until the present day. History sends a strong message on the necessity of comprehensive regulations and, indeed, responsible behaviour of anatomists and the medical community in general.

Just as in his own day, Vesalius and his work represent a stimulus, challenge and provocation for students and practitioners of medicine and science. His Fabrica, revived this year in its full English translation, remains one of the most remarkable intellectual achievements in human history.

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