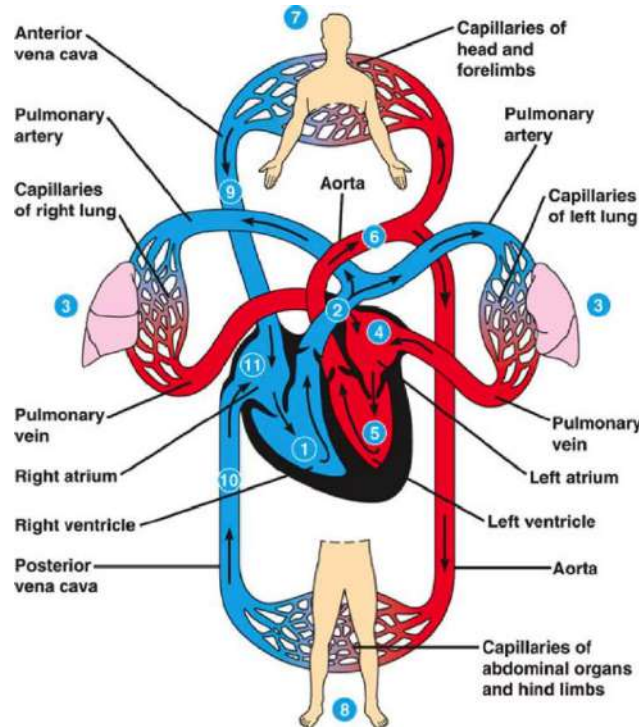


How We Studied

By Dr. Derek Conte

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When I was in school we studied a wide range of natural and biological sciences: physics, organic chemistry, anatomy and physiology, immunology, histology, pathology, microbiology, parasitology, X-Ray physics and much more. How to keep all that information straight in one's head and retaining it was the challenge. It was an exciting challenge.

To me, it was more important to retain everything I could for the long haul so I could bring knowledge to future patients. Not merely to pass hundreds of tests and the four national board exams we had facing us. I believed it was vital to control all this material and understand it as a whole, not as discreet, disconnected systems. After all, we are human beings that rely on all of our systems working together harmoniously for us to be alive in the world. One part cannot contradict the purpose of another. They must all cooperate and make sense, simultaneously.

The strategy we devised was to have one of our study group members go up to the 4'X8' white board I screwed into my dining room wall and, without any help from the group or a textbook, draw out entire anatomical structures and systems in different colors. They would then have to verbally name, and label, each structure in detail and describe its function and purpose.

An example would be the circulatory system... but not just the vessels. We included the heart, lungs and all the tissues they fed. The object was to trace the transit of a single red blood cell around the entire

body from the heart to the tissues, back to the heart again, then on to the lungs and its return to the heart: every chamber, every valve, and every capillary bed feeding the various tissues. Of course, no one got it right on the first try.

But we continued: the next student tried, then the next, then the next. After all had tried we set about to make corrections and complete the labelings. This was scary, but great fun for all.

We would then go for round two just the same way. Everyone got much closer to perfection now and by the time we went around three or four times each, making corrections all the way, we could teach the chapters. This strategy led to "A" grades for our group on a regular basis.

But more important than the grades was the satisfaction we felt and the joy in the knowledge that we had a much stronger sense of how this beautiful human body of ours works. But an even more basic question kept coming back to me: What in the end was the most vital action of the body to preserve life on the most basic and elemental level? Next month we'll try to tackle it.

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