At 10 p.m. on 8 November 1723 a fire broke out in the Weigh House, in the upstairs quarters used by the surgeons’ guild. A careless act on the part of the servant had caused the wooden wall between the landing and the guildhall to catch fire. The flames were extinguished quickly, but one of the two famous paintings by Rembrandt, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Joan Deijman*, which had been hanging on the wooden wall, appeared to be irreparably damaged. The *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Frederik Ruysch* was spared, but Ruysch’s days of glory were long past. His new interest, the anatomy of fruits and plants, had been prompted by a lack of corpses to dissect. At first he had tried to console himself with the ‘diversions’ of his garden, but he had soon made a virtue of necessity and started to dissect plants, confessing that he found it impossible to waste even one day in idle pursuits.

In 1726 Ruysch wrote to Johann Christoph Bohle that in the past year he had dissected only one corpse. He complained to the burgomasters, telling them that the hospital regents were refusing to give him bodies. The regents thought the anatomists pretentious, and maintained that there were far fewer suitable corpses—that is, ‘strangers’ with no blood relations in the town—than they imagined.¹ Unwilling to deal with the matter further, the burgomasters declared their intention of leaving the distribution of corpses to the regents of the hospital. Any problems that arose could be put to the Collegium Medicum for arbitration. Ruysch promptly complained to the Collegium about the regents’ unrelenting opposition. In the old days, he had been allowed to go to the chairman’s home to report his intention to dissect a body, but now he was required to go to his office. Previously the corpses had been discreetly brought through the door dividing the ‘stable’ (as the morgue was popularly called) from the dissecting room, but this door had been closed off, first by blocking it with chairs and benches, then by dumping a pile of peat in front of it. Now that the bodies

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¹ Amsterdam City Archives, Collegium Medicum archive; hospital archive 1019.
had to be carried outside on a stretcher, everyone could see who was about to be cut open. Since as far back as 1673, unwanted babies that had been drowned (and given to the hospital for burial by those who found them) had been handed over to Ruysch. After performing the autopsy, if he considered them useful for study or preservation, he had taken them home with him, but this was no longer allowed either. Ruysch complained, saying that for years he had gone to the hospital in search of the female corpses he needed to teach anatomy to the midwives, and had ordered them to be brought quietly, as custom dictated, to the *theatrum anatomicum*. After serving as teaching material, such corpses had been fetched by a hospital servant and taken away for burial. The same procedure had been followed with the cadavers used in the lessons Ruysch gave to the surgeons, lessons that were becoming less frequent owing to the lack of bodies. The midwives had appealed to him to remedy the situation, but he had been forced to tell them that his last request for a female corpse had been answered very brusquely. He saw no alternative but to present the Collegium Medicum with the following demands: free access to the hospital to view the ‘strangers’ among the deceased and choose those suitable for dissection; permission to report this directly to the chairman (at his home, not his office); the re-opening of the door between the morgue and the dissecting room; permission to keep the bodies of dead children after performing an autopsy; and a steady supply of corpses for teaching purposes.2

**Possible Successors**

It was too late, however. Ruysch no longer enjoyed any political protection, and his position as *praetor* of the surgeons’ guild had been given de facto to someone else. He was nearly ninety, and the time was fast approaching when he would no longer be able to work. In fact, he had already thought about stopping, but was reluctant to do so because of the daily torrent of requests for answers to numerous anatomical questions. Most importantly, he was still curious and relatively energetic. This was confirmed by Haller, who had seen during his visits that Ruysch was busy not just with his collection but with

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2 Amsterdam City Archives, Collegium Medicum archive 3, fol. 127.