

Anatomical Legacy Collections:

Roundtable Discussion of Specific Case Studies

The following is a summary of the topics that were discussed on August 12, 2021, at the third installment of the Anatomical Legacy Collections Webinar Series.

What happens if provenance cannot be identified?

Once you take possession of the human remains, you can start the process of determining provenance (start telling the story from that point). Sometimes when someone inherits a lab, they inherit the remains. If there's no documentation, the first thing to try to do is contact the person who was in charge of the lab before you.

Sometimes alumni or others will try to donate their private collections to universities and museums. It is arguable that it's more ethical to retain within museums and institutions than to allow circulation in the collectors' market. Accepting donated remains leads to several possible choices: accepting in perpetuity and providing a safe place for these remains or cremate and then provide respectful disposition.

Storage of tissues

Some labs don't have the luxury of maintaining collections indefinitely, as space and funding is limited. This could possibly be helped by larger labs offering to store remains and allow others to visit the lab to conduct research. Another option would be to create a large, organized repository of human tissues at a government funded site.

Museums have historically functioned as a repository for orphaned university anatomical collections. New accessions are increasingly rare and requirements for transfer have become more stringent registrarily speaking. As we move along and develop national guidelines, there may be an appropriate repository for certain materials at a federal entity.

If there's a way to identify and repatriate, on the balance, there is more good about being explicit than there is bad that comes out of the experience.

If provenance remains unattainable, and permanent storage is not an option, would it be advisable to make a CT-scan/photographic record and then respectfully dispose of the tissues?

The person who took the images would then become the custodian of the images and would need to know what happens to them and who has access to them. If provenance becomes known a discussion around the images should take place. Human remains should still be retained or transferred as a last resort. We have very stringent guidelines for the use of imaging data from patients and the use of their data, so we should also have stringent guidelines for the imaging of human tissues.

Fetal collections

If you can find anything historical about the collection, you're putting yourself in the crosshairs if you publicly acknowledge you had such a collection. It is not proper to document human fetal remains photographically.

According to one participant: “We had a fetal collection that was disposed of in 2010 and is buried in the same cemetery as our other donors whose families did not want the cremains back. We had a burial service and acknowledged a space in the cemetery with a headstone for remembrance purposes. We knew who the creator of the collection was and involved our local medical examiners office to oversee the disposal also.”

Some things to consider when disposing of fetal tissues: should you memorialize them? Are you able to find any historical evidence for the collection? Are you going to allow access to these collections?

Regulation and oversight

Should there be an IRB-like committee, *i.e.* a larger body that helps make the decisions? It might benefit researchers to have an oversight committee to help make these decisions because it’s difficult to make these decisions on your own. If you had an anatomical ethics committee you don’t have the individual responsibility of making these decisions.

Many departments and universities currently have their own unique approval systems. University of Florida has a human osteology advisory committee, but broader committees that cover human tissues overall.

Going forward, it would be good to have more detailed consent forms regarding body and tissue donation to prevent ethical dilemmas regarding acquisition and use of human tissues.

Related paper: [A Transparent Oversight Policy for Human Anatomical Specimen Management](#) (Brandi Schmitt *et al.*)

For-profit sale of human remains

The majority of for-profit medical human remains have ended up in private markets and entities. There’s less regulatory oversight overall for private entities. In fact, it’s very easy to just go online and buy human bones. Although this is legal, legal doesn’t always mean ethical. Regardless of where these remains originated, they should be treated ethically. We need to also evaluate the self-policing of non-transplant anatomical companies (“Body Brokers”).