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## What They Ask Us ... About Donating One's Body to Medical School

Winfried Herbst

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What they ask us . . .

## About Donating One's Body to Medical School

REVEREND WINFRID HERBST, S.D.S.

It is said that there is another path besides the conventional one that a Catholic may follow in the disposition of his body after death. He may donate it to one of the Catholic schools of medicine of our Catholic Universities or other medical schools; and this gift of one's body can be made with the complete sanction and blessing of the Church. Is that true?

Yes. And many states have now passed laws whereby a person can legally dispose of his own body through provision before death. Moreover, there is an acute shortage of bodies now, because welfare laws now provide for the burial of the indigent.

**What are bodies thus donated to medical schools used for?**

They are a priceless textbook in our medical schools. All the knowledge of modern science can devise no substitute for actual observation of the wondrous workings and construction of the human body. The offering of one's body to the cause of all suffering humanity is a great good work.

**How are the bodies treated in the anatomy laboratory?**

The body is treated with all the reverence and respect which are its due. All Catholic anatomy labs are under direct observation of the cler-

gy, and all prescribed ritual for the disposition of the remains is scrupulously observed.

**When does the body go to the Medical School?**

It is necessary that the body be received as soon as possible after death in order that it may be properly preserved. It is not necessary to employ an undertaker or to purchase a casket. As soon as notified, arrangements are made for the transportation of the body to the Medical School. No wake is necessary; and it is possible to have the Requiem Mass without the presence of the dead body. If it is desired, an undertaker may be obtained and regular funeral services held, after which the remains will be delivered to the Medical School by the undertaker. But in that case only the cost of the transportation of the remains to the Medical School will be borne by the School. Bodies on which an autopsy has been performed cannot be used by the Medical School.

**What happens to the body when it is received by the School?**

Marquette University School of Medicine informs me: "After the body has been received by us, it is thoroughly preserved by embalming. It is then stored until we use it for the study of Anatomy. Students are assigned to a dissection which usual-

ly begins in fall at the opening of the academic year. The work continues throughout the year and dissection is usually not completed until the end of May. During the course of the year all parts of the body are removed and incinerated. At the end of the year all remaining parts, which are mostly skeletal, are incinerated. The ashes are then taken out into the country and sprinkled on a plowed field. On rare occasions we incinerate the remains of one individual separately and turn the ashes over to the family. This is done only when a special request is made."

**Then what about Christian burial and canon law? And about cremation?**

The Church considers dissection of the body for scientific purposes as final disposition, and therefore does not require deposit of remains in consecrated ground. As regards cremation in this case, the Church tacitly tolerates it for the promotion of the Science of Anatomy. (Cf. Vermeersch, S.J., *Theologia Moralis*, Vol. 3, pp. 557.) If a priest is present at death he can at once say the ritual prayers for after expiration; otherwise the pastor, who should in all cases be informed, is called to do so.

**Should such a donation of one's body be made as a provision of one's will?**

No; because there is usually a considerable delay before a will is probated. But it should be evidenced by a written instrument, signed by the donor and two competent witnesses who know the signature to be that of the donor. The gift may be revoked by the donor at any time during his lifetime. An instrument as mentioned above, would be: "I herewith state that it is my desire to donate my body immediately after

my death to the Marquette University School of Medicine for scientific purposes." Or, of course, the School of the donor's choice. A card that such a donor may carry about with him could read: IN CASE OF MY DEATH THIS CERTIFIES THAT: I . . . . . have dedicated my body to medical research and education. At the time of my death immediately notify the Department of Anatomy, [Marquette University School of Medicine.]

**Does the Medical School require a release of claim on the body?**

Yes. The wishes of one who has dedicated his body to a Medical School should, of course, be respected by his relatives. But, to avoid difficulties, the next of kin, with two witnesses, should sign a RELEASE OF CLAIM: "The undersigned, being next of kin hereby release to [Marquette University School of Medicine] all claims to the remains of . . . . . to be used for scientific purposes." It is to be noted again that if the family heir, or other interested party insists on transferring the body to the church for the funeral services, the party must make all the necessary arrangements with the department of anatomy and an undertaker and pay all the expenses thereof. Otherwise, as mentioned above, there would be no expenses.

**Why should I do this?**

The science of medicine is impossible without this study. The medical students who will become physicians through your generosity are mindful of the priceless value of your generous gift. Finally, those who enjoy the fullness of health through the study and research made in the anatomy laboratory acknowledge their indebtedness to their anonymous unknown benefactor.