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# The Difficult Search for Life After Death

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So much of our day-to-day lives are consumed by just that—our lives. The content of our conscious human experience is contained within the 80 or so years we spend as living beings. However, regardless of your belief about what happens during—or following—the end of our life, death is inevitable. Thinking about death is often uncomfortable, if not downright terrifying. Our evolutionary drive to continue living is often at odds with the biological reality of what will occur once we expire. Many people seek a purpose in their death, seeing donating their body as a way to give to something bigger than themselves. When the circumstances of a person's death and their physical characteristics allow, their organs can be donated and used to save lives. Alternatively, people can “donate their bodies to science,” a colloquial term for cadaver donation.

Despite being commonly thought of as a single operational unit, the processes of cadaver donation and organ donation could not be more distinct. The United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) manages the nationwide network of organ donors in the United States, the only Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network in the country.[1] Through strict guidelines and regulations instituted by the UNOS, this network is standardized across all hospitals in the United States. On the other hand, cadaver donation, also called whole-body donation, has no such standardization. Without a single governing body or national network, much of the donation process is up to the discretion of individual states and the donors themselves.[2]

In the absence of federal regulations of whole-body donation, the management of donations and procurement becomes significantly more complicated. In some states, like Virginia, Florida, Maryland, Illinois, and Texas, state anatomical boards manage the body donations.[3] These state anatomical boards act as 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, only serving licensed and accredited medical schools and research institutions in the state. Although donation through state anatomical boards is typically considered the best way to ensure a regulated donation process, donors are unable to decide which specific institute will receive their donation. This may be a point of concern for those who wish to give their body to a certain institution they have a personal or professional connection with. In the 40+ states without state anatomical boards, potential donors can find lists of accredited universities and research centers in their state and select a specific institution with which to register a donation. Although this requires more research and decision-making on the behalf of the donor, it allows them to contribute to certain institutions they may have a connection with. State anatomical boards may provide a legitimate entity through which to donate, but they are not responsible for regulating all of the whole-body donations in that state. Rather, they partner with accredited institutions to provide them with cadavers.[4] Anatomical donation programs can legally operate without having to partner with their state anatomical board, and there are no uniform state laws requiring these programs to adhere to the same standards of transparency and traceability that organ donation programs are.

Without federal guidelines or clear state laws, a significant part of the whole-body donation process is managed by private entities. Not associated with universities or research institutions, these organizations refer to themselves as “non-transplant tissue banks”; others call them “body brokers.”[5] Although brokers acquire bodies through donation, the way in which they market themselves to potential donors is more aggressive than the way universities and research centers do. Unlike universities and other accredited institutions, brokers solicit

donations through flyers and advertising at funeral homes, hospitals, nursing homes and hospices.[6] According to an investigation by Reuters, some brokers will pay morticians up to \$1,430 for referring a donor.[7] Brokers also offer to cover the costs of body transportation and cremation in exchange for a donation, which can otherwise cost upwards of \$7,000. Universities and research centers cover the cost of cremation and the shipping of cremated remains to the donor's next-of-kin, but transportation costs and other expenses are usually not covered. When confronted at funeral homes by pamphlets with titles like "Providing Options in Your Time of Need," the grieving families of the deceased are presented with an opportunity that is framed as financial relief. For low-income families, this relief may be the only way to honor the deceased without incurring thousands of dollars of debt from an expensive funeral service.[8]

Once the bodies are acquired, brokers dissect and sell the cadavers to medical researchers and training organizations.[9] Unlike state anatomical boards, many brokers operate for-profit. The portion of the body not designated for use is cremated and returned to the donor's next of kin. After use by the client, the body parts are either returned to the broker for reuse or cremated and disposed of. Some broker organizations are designated 501(c)(3) nonprofits, although these made up only 9 of the 34 brokers in the US in 2017.[5] A nonprofit status is not necessarily a precedent for upstanding practices, either. In 2012, an organization known as the United Tissue Network converted to nonprofit status after being required to do so by Oklahoma law.[5] However, the funeral homeowners who had owned a 50% stake in the recently converted nonprofit also founded a for-profit company that provided "management services" to United Tissue. In 2015, their nonprofit, United Tissue, paid their for-profit \$412,000 for services—essentially giving themselves money. On other occasions, the nonprofit has supplied parts donated to United Tissue to for-profit businesses owned by United Tissue investors.

Although the predatory behavior exhibited by brokers like United Tissue has blemished the cadaver industry, the whole-body donation programs run by reputable medical universities and other accredited institutions provide an important scientific resource for training physicians and cutting-edge research.[10] Doctors agree that the use of cadavers in medical training is not something that can be easily discarded; until significant technological advancements are made in 3D anatomy modeling, it is essential that future physicians are trained on actual human tissue.[11] Whole-body donation also provides a means to study diseases in a human specimen. Recently, a potential cure for Type 1 diabetes was found through research using a donated pancreas.[12] Despite these many advancements that are made possible by whole-body donation, the lack of regulation and transparency in the industry has allowed individuals to extort the system for profit. Under the guise of scientific advancement, these companies utilize the cost-inflated funeral industry to manipulate grieving low-income families.

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