



Physical Anthropology Section – 2007

H107 The Donation Dilemma: Academic Ethics and Public Participation at the Anthropological Research Facility

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of the unique ethical issues facing the Forensic Anthropology Center at the University of Tennessee, so that they can effectively disseminate information about the body donation program and promote the growth of similar programs.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by better informing fellow forensic anthropologists of both the more practical issues facing FAC, as well as, the program specific obstacles that are challenging but professionally stimulating. It is the hope that with this knowledge and open forum of information, that the profession can more effectively propose a resolution, be it in the classroom or the professional environment.

A panel discussion at the 2006 Seattle, WA AAFS meetings addressed, for the first time, the personal and professional issues facing forensic anthropologists in light of greater public participation. It is the purpose of this paper to address specifically these issues as they affect the Forensic Anthropology Center at the University of Tennessee, as a unique program that marries both a personal relationship with living donors and an academic interest in the skeletal remains.

One need look no farther than popular culture in order to grasp the recent ubiquity of public exposure to and mainstream interest in the forensic sciences. Despite drastically oversimplifying the scientific challenges facing forensic anthropologists, representations of the forensic sciences in popular culture nevertheless have generated an external interest in the academic study of human remains. The body donation program at the University of Tennessee is undoubtedly the best example of a positive site of interaction between this growing public awareness of and appreciation for forensic anthropology and the rigorous scientific and academic understanding of the processes of death, decay and population variation. While this manifestation of the "CSI effect" is helpful in increasing interest in the donation process and acceptance of the research conducted at "The Body Farm", the work at the Anthropological Research Facility (ARF), as a scientifically rigorous and academically valid endeavor is, in consequence, necessarily complicated. The Forensic Anthropology Center (FAC) and its body donation program, as a unique institution within the field of forensic anthropology, removes the scientific issues surrounding death from a laboratory setting and relocates them within the public context of living donors and grieving families. The questions that remain to be resolved, in addition to the scientific objects of investigation, are the practical, personal and ethical dilemmas that accompany the constructed relationship among the forensic anthropologists, the medical and legal communities and, most importantly, the social network that supports the program itself.

The ARF at the University of Tennessee has grown to serve not only as a temporary repository for unidentified remains, but also as the intermediary resting place for the individuals donated through the body donation program. While the donation program ensures the continuing addition of the human remains necessary for research at the ARF and has provided an unprecedented diversity of modern skeletal materials for the William M Bass collection, its combined scholarly and public nature, particularly when coupled with its recent popularity, requires the anthropologists working at the FAC to operate outside of the traditional roles of an academic program. Whereas a typical forensic anthropologist focuses exclusively on the rigorous scientific investigation of individual remains in either a law enforcement or academic setting, those working with the donation program at the University of Tennessee must serve in a variety of disparate and often non-traditional capacities: as liaisons with the public in order to accurately and effectively educate prospective donors about the realities of the program; as funerary consultants for those contemplating donation in their final arrangements; as grief counselors who must ensure a high level of respect in their treatment of the donor's remains and who must also communicate this respect to the grieving families; and, finally, as scientists and progressive academics whose responsibility to the donor lies in making full use of his or her remains to advance the knowledge of the field. To these forensic anthropologists, therefore, the donor is both a numbered object of scientific study and a named individual, who, over the course of contact with the program, make the transition from living to deceased. The tensions between these irreconcilable positions are not traditionally covered in any scholarly program within the field; yet maintaining these positions is necessary to ensure the continuing success of the FAC. The University of Tennessee's body donation program therefore provides a unique site of interaction between the public and academic pressures of the discipline of forensic anthropology and the ways in



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which these tensions are changing in the face of mounting public interest, both positive and negative. It is this changing face of the discipline as specifically located in the academic, popular and ethical responsibilities of those anthropologists working with the body donation program at the University of Tennessee that this paper proposes to examine.

It is the intention of this discussion to better inform fellow forensic anthropologists of both the more practical issues facing FAC, as well as, the program specific obstacles that are challenging but professionally stimulating. It is the hope that with this knowledge and open forum of information that the profession can more effectively propose resolution, be it in the classroom or the professional environment.

Anthropological Research Facility, Body Donation, Ethics