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Posted by Anonymous on Tue, 2016-05-03 12:41

Human skeletons: This question combines two previously asked questions regarding human skeletons.

Q1: We have been offered a human skeleton that has, up until now, been used for medical purposes. Are there any laws or special responsibilities we would have to comply with if we accepted this donation? Is it legal for us to have a human skeleton?

Q2: Cremated skeleton: I would like to know if anyone has had to dispose of a cremated skeleton from a school. The one here has been here for 8 years approx. and I would like to know if there is any departmental protocol or ethics involved as well as what should be done with it.

Voting:



No votes yet

Year Level:

7
8
9

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Human skeletons

Submitted by on 25 May 2016

Answer reviewed 23rd January 2023

Use of a human skeleton by schools:

It was quite common years ago for schools and universities to have human skeletons for their studies, which have been sourced through scientific suppliers. These days, more robust plastic replicas are available for purchase. Information regarding possession of a real human skeleton in a secondary school setting is hard to find. Most of the relevant legislation surrounding human remains, covers human tissue material obtained through autopsies and by patient consent after surgical procedures.^{1,2} Each state/territory has legislation regarding the use and disposal of human tissue and remains and the relevant legislation should be referred to in your own jurisdiction.

Receiving a donated human skeleton that has been used for medical purposes could pose some legal and ethical considerations. For example, did the person intend for their remains to be used in an educational setting? Is there a requirement for paperwork to register the presence of a human skeleton in your school jurisdiction? Will the skeleton be treated with respect? Science ASSIST would advise against accepting this donation.

Disposal of human bones or cremated remains:

Legal and ethical consideration should be given when disposing of these and they should be treated with respect.^{3,4} Each state/territory has legislation regarding the use and disposal of human tissue and remains.

The human anatomy departments of universities, particularly those which have schools of medicine, are sometimes willing to accept donations of human skeletal remains from other teaching institutions, including schools. They are familiar with and governed by the state/territory legislation that applies in their jurisdiction. Other options include contacting medical waste disposal specialist companies who will dispose of human skeletal remains as medical waste.

If the remains are ashes, it may be helpful to contact your local government crematorium services for local advice. It appears that there is no legislation concerning these. They can be buried in a cemetery, kept in an urn or container or scattered on land or water. Please be aware that if you choose to spread the ashes, you may require permission from the land owners, or authorities, e.g., such as the local council, responsible for that land or water.

References and further reading:

¹ NSW Government department of health, (2021, May 24), '*Human tissue, anatomy and disposal of bodies*', retrieved from <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/legislation/Pages/human-tissue-anatomy.aspx>

² Victorian Government Legislation, (2020, December 9, '*Human Tissue Act 1982*', retrieved from <https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/human-tissue-act-1982/045>

³ Western health website, (accessed 2023, January 22), Coman J, Kelly AM, Savulescu J, Craig S. '*What to do with the skeleton in your cupboard?*' BMJ 2019; 367:l6705, retrieved from https://www.westernhealth.org.au/EducationandResearch/Research_Groups/JECEMR/Pages/Publications---Health-law-and-ethics.aspx

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UK Collections trust website, (2005, October), '*Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums*', retrieved from <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/resource/guidance-for-the-care-of-human-remains-in-museums/>

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