

**Submission Id:** 5231

**Title**

*Medical Student Attitudes Towards Unclaimed Bodies in Anatomical Education*

**Priority 1 (Research Category)**

Education and training

**Presenters**

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**Abstract**

Context: Dissection of cadavers is a common and highly regarded practice in anatomical education. To meet demand for cadavers, some medical institutions facilitate dissection of unclaimed bodies, or corpses for which no individual has claimed responsibility. Recent literature demonstrates widespread discomfort with this practice among anatomical course directors. Comfort levels among medical students have not been similarly reported.

Objective: The purpose of this study was to characterize prevailing attitudes among U.S. medical students towards the dissection of unclaimed bodies.

Population Studied: Two hundred twelve students from one U.S. medical institution participated in an anonymous online survey.

Study Design: Survey items were developed to capture students' academic and emotional experience with anatomic dissection and to ascertain ethical judgments on the use of unclaimed bodies in medical education.

Results: Students reported high regard for cadaveric dissection in general, with 170 (80%) respondents endorsing it as critical to anatomical education. Most students (n=206, 97%) expressed comfort dissecting self-donated bodies while far fewer (n=66, 31.1%) expressed comfort dissecting unclaimed bodies. This latter finding significantly correlated with gender ( $p < 0.01$ ), class cohort ( $p < 0.01$ ), and judgement of the practice as unethical ( $p < 0.01$ ), but not with religious affiliation or age. Respondents were more likely to disagree with either ethical judgement than they were to agree with the corresponding counter-judgement (e.g., hesitation to judge the practice as ethical yet equivalently judging it as unethical).

Conclusions: A clear majority of students expressed negative attitudes towards dissection of unclaimed bodies. These findings indicate that students' values and ethics may conflict with institutional and/or state-level policies that permit this practice. This conflict warrants further study to better develop curricular practices of humanism in medicine during a time of critical professional identity formation.

