

# **Proposal to University of Pittsburgh Medical School in Regards to 20th Century Cadaver Acquisitions**

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## **Abstract**

This proposal seeks to establish a connection between University of Pittsburgh's anthropology department and medical school to identify and repatriate the remains currently in the physical anthropology labs. Specifically examining medical school archives and records relevant to cadaver acquisition in the early 20th century. Identifying and reintering remains will grant these individuals their personhood and honor their family's wishes for burial. A collaboration between these departments will progress the university's relationship with affected communities as well as strengthen university educational programs in medical anthropology.

## **Introduction**

Medical school education in the United States and Europe has always relied heavily on the use of cadavers for dissection in anatomy lectures and practicums. The issue lies in acquiring bodies to use - formal avenues for donating were not available, nor did many individuals want to donate due to religious or cultural practices surrounding deathways and "moving on". To combat this, medical schools hired individuals to acquire cadavers for them, but this usually ended in graverobbing or, in some cases, murder. [1] After flaws in this system were exposed, and actively harmed communities and residents, states began passing "bone bills" regulating how medical schools could obtain remains for dissection. Pennsylvania passed one such bill in 1883, authorizing a board to distribute unclaimed remains to medical schools. Many of these bills gave families less than 48 hours to claim their loved ones before they became property of the state to distribute, and in turn disproportionately affected marginalized and poor communities. [2] After dissection remains were either disposed of, buried in unmarked graves or cleaned to create skeletal models, adding to the great number of skeletal collections across the United States consisting of unidentified individuals. [3]

University of Pittsburgh's anthropology department currently possesses a number of skeletal remains received from the University of Pittsburgh Medical School. Anatomy lectures and cadaver labs in the early 20th century utilized these remains, and the anthropology department acquired them after the medical school deemed them no longer necessary for their use. The remains currently reside in the physical anthropology labs on the ground floor of Wesley W. Posvar Hall in a disarticulated state. They are organized, not by individual, but anatomical pieces, removing the personhood from the people to whom these remains belong.

The anthropology department has reason to believe that these unclaimed remains were sourced from local poorhouses or medical institutions, without the ability for loved ones to claim them before the university. This theory is supported by the fact that the University of Pittsburgh owns a plot in McKee's Rock specifically for interring unclaimed remains after the medical school utilizes them in cadaver labs.

Currently, a small group of professors and students is working on reuniting the disarticulated remains, and plans on identifying these individuals and returning them to next of

kin. However, some of these remains are missing significant portions of bone resulting from cadaver dissection, limiting osteological recording. Additionally, the lack of documentation related to the remains and their acquisition from the medical school creates barriers in the identification process.

## **Project Description**

This project aims to connect the anthropology department with records and archives at the university's medical school, not only to search for information that may lead to the repatriation of these remains, but also to foster a connection between the two groups, bolstering the medical anthropology programming throughout the university.

## **Rationale**

This project gives the university the opportunity to connect with negatively impacted communities by returning remains to loved ones. Additionally, it will allow anthropology students to connect with repatriation work in a meaningful way, as well as giving them experience with archival research and identification practices.

## **Plan of Work**

A project leader - either a professor or graduate student - will accompany a group of selected anthropology students and interns to connect with the medical school records and archives, held both at the medical school and in the University of Pittsburgh Archival Collections. There, with the guidance of an archivist familiar with the collection, they will search for records related to anatomy lectures, cadaver labs, and cadaver acquisition records. If possible, this would include access to specimen collections, in hopes to find missing remains separated from the rest of the individual. By relating these acquisition records to the remains, and cross-referencing any medical history within them, individuals can be identified through osteobiography and pathology analysis.

After identifying relevant records and documents, students will utilize them as a resource for further researching the remains and their origin. In the event this leads to identification of remains, the anthropology department would work in conjunction with the medical school for the repatriation process. It is vital that the medical school participates in this process, as the education of medical students in the early 20th century relied on these remains, and leaving them out of discussions with descendant communities denies their involvement in the matter. By allowing them to connect with communities and next of kin, the university can continue its mission to heal the relationship between the institution and affected groups in the Pittsburgh area.

## **Conclusions**

Fostering the connection between University of Pittsburgh's medical school and anthropology department through meaningful work with local descendant communities and

repatriation of remains will allow for all parties to acknowledge the past, heal and continue to build strong relationships within and outside of the university. As efforts to recognize harm done by anthropologists in the past grow in the U.S. [4] , the university can use this opportunity to contribute to a more ethical and person-centered field of biological anthropology.

## References

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2. (1883). UNCLAIMED CADAVERS, DISTRIBUTION AND DISPOSITION.
3. (2024). Smithsonian Human Remains Task Force Report to the Secretary, Smithsonian Institution.
4. Association, A. A. "AAA Statement on Ethics." from <https://americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-ethics/>.