

# **The Royal College of Surgeons of England and the Board of Trustees of the Hunterian Collection.**

**Submission to the Human Remains Working Group, November 2001**

## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 The Royal College of Surgeons of England (RCS) maintains three museums containing preserved human remains. This paper sets out:
- the historical basis for the collections;
  - the extent of the current holdings and current arrangements for care;
  - issues relating to future retention of such material.
- 1.2 It is noted that the work of the Human Remains Working Group (HRWG) may overlap with that of the NHS Retained Organs Commission (ROC). The RCS has made separate representation to the ROC in respect of its modern medical teaching collections.

## **2 History of the Collections**

- 2.1 The College has been responsible for the care of a museum since 1799, when the collection of the surgeon John Hunter (1728-1793) was purchased by the Government and placed in the care of the Company of Surgeons (subsequently the Royal College of Surgeons, 1800).
- 2.2 The principal part of John Hunter's collection comprised approximately 13,500 preparations of human, animal and plant material, arranged to illustrate the principals of the 'animal oeconomy'. Specimens were ordered to illustrate analogous relationships between structure and function across a range of species, with human material being included in the general series rather than treated separately. A collection comprising dissections of pathological structures (morbid anatomy) included a larger proportion of human specimens, but retained Hunter's comparative approach. The collection also contained specimens relating to Hunter's experimental research.
- 2.3 After 1800 the Hunterian Collection formed the basis for a new museum, which was subsequently expanded under the care of series of distinguished Conservators including William Clift, Richard Owen, William Flower and Arthur Keith. For much of the 19th century the RCS Museum was a *de facto* national collection of comparative anatomy.
- 2.4 From the 1870s the museum became the focus for an extensive collection of human osteological remains, incorporating among others the Barnard-Davis collection and the museum of the Royal Anthropological Institute. In 1907 the museum of the Odontological Society of Great Britain was placed on loan to the College. This collection was founded in 1859 to support the emergent dental profession, and was closely based on Hunter's comparative approach.
- 2.5 In May 1941 the College was badly damaged by bombing, and over two thirds of the 65,000 specimens in the museum were destroyed. After the war College chose to create separate museums holding human anatomical and pathological specimens for teaching and research (the Wellcome Museums of Anatomy and Pathology). The Odontological Collection, which had survived largely intact, formed a third museum, while the Hunterian Collection and surviving 19th century comparative material was displayed in a new Hunterian Museum which opened in 1963. Between 1946 and 1968 the remainder of the

pre-war human osteology series (approx. 6000 specimens) was transferred to the Natural History Museum.

### 3 Current holdings

- 3.1 Since 1993 the Hunterian and Odontological Museums have been open to the public without restriction. The teaching collections are now housed together in the Wellcome Museum of Anatomy and Pathology which is open to medical visitors and to other pre-booked educational groups. The museums receive approximately 15,000 visitors per year.
- 3.2 The RCS museums hold a number of distinct collections. These are:
  - Hunterian Collection – 3,707 specimens, of which 1564 are human;
  - College Museum Collection – 4411 specimens, 1501 human;
  - Odontological Collection – 10751 specimens, 3437 human;
  - Microscope Slide Collection – 14629 historical (pre-1950) slides including 1028 known to be of human material; with a further 20178 slides and blocks principally of post-war human pathological material;
  - Anatomy/Pathology collections – 4716 specimens, 3851 human;
  - 4912 individual unmounted human bones used for teaching.
- 3.3 Human material in the collections is used in the following ways:
  - *Exhibition:* Human material from the Hunterian and College collections is displayed in the Hunterian Museum, where it is arranged in accordance with Hunter's original schema.
  - *Teaching:* The Wellcome Museum is used for teaching and individual study. Specimens are also removed for teaching in other areas of the College. The museums are frequently used by art students studying anatomy as part of pre-booked groups.
  - *Research:* Although the collections are available to researchers use has been limited since the closure of the College's scientific departments in the early 1990s. MRC and other guidelines on consent for the use of human tissue in research may also be a factor. The museums currently receive about 10 significant requests each year.
- 3.4 The majority of the human specimens consist of dissections preserved in fluid, and dry mounted individual bones. There are only a small number of complete human skeletons and large anatomical prosections.
- 3.5 The collections contain 205 specimens known to be of non-European origin, of which 157 are part of the Odontological Collection. The collections contain approximately 400 archaeological specimens, most of which are skulls and partial dentitions of UK origin.
- 3.6 The RCS Museums received Registration in 1994, and the Hunterian Collection was designated as a collection of national importance in 1999. The College maintains written policies covering Acquisition & Disposal, Access, and Collection Care. These are subject to regular review and approval by the College Council, which acts as the Trustee body for the museum collections as a whole, and by the Board of Trustees of the Hunterian Collection (established under the terms of the 1799 gift) which reports to the College Council.
- 3.7 The Acquisition & Disposal Policy sets out specific criteria for consideration of human remains (see Appendix 1). This policy was modified in June 2001 to

provide a framework for consideration of restitution claims in respect of non-European human remains.

#### **4. Issues relating to future care and retention**

4.1 The College recognises the duty of care it has towards its collections as a registered museum, and also the special circumstances attendant on the care of a collection containing human remains. Particular attention has been given to the following:

- The value of preserved human remains as historical artefacts;
- An awareness of cultural and political issues arising from retention;
- The importance of robust and equitable frameworks for consideration of restitution claims based on individual circumstance;
- The need for adequate and sensitive presentation.

#### 4.2 *Evidential value*

The RCS collections were established principally for use in medical education, rather than as a source of 'raw material' for research. Teaching specimens constitute artefacts that reflect the context of their creation and use. For example, the preparations in the Hunterian and Odontological collections reveal the techniques through which anatomical structures were identified as well the conceptual and didactic frameworks through which their meaning was constructed. Their meanings derive from their individual properties and their placement in relation to one another. Removal of human specimens would render the collections meaningless.

#### 4.3 *Cultural issues*

The definition of human remains as objects of scientific study constitutes a depersonalising act. Historically the process of acquisition has taken place without consent. This original context of collection cannot be ignored, and in some cases – most notably in the case of non-western human remains – it may be intrinsically related to issues of (dis)empowerment which are of continuing political concern.

#### 4.4 *Equitable frameworks*

Decisions about the retention or acquisition of human remains require a robust framework which considers their value for research, teaching or historical interpretation against their emotional, cultural or political significance. For example a recent survey revealed six specimens in the RCS pathology collection taken at post-mortems by the army medical team working in Bergen-Belsen after liberation. Although of demonstrable value for teaching, once identified their emotional significance made their retention inappropriate and arrangements were made for their burial. Frameworks must take into account the value of remains to communities as well as individuals, and should recognise established legal frameworks through which claims might be made. For example the RCS recognises the laws governing return of human remains in Australia, New Zealand and North America, and it is likely that other national schemes might be recognised in due course.

#### 4.5 *Adequate presentation*

The retention of human remains by museums is only justifiable if their actual value as historic or scientific evidence can be adequately demonstrated. In the case of the public exhibition of such remain this requires sensitive interpretation and the creation of an appropriate context for display. For example the planned refurbishment of the Hunterian Museum will provide more contextual information surrounding the origin of the collection, including

the public opposition to grave-robbing as well as the value of anatomical teaching to the practice of medicine.

## **5 Conclusion**

- 5.1 The RCS welcomes the current review into the retention of human remains in museum collections. The College is aware of its responsibilities as custodian of such collections, and of the need to periodically re-evaluate policies on display, research, acquisition and disposal in the light of changing circumstances.
- 5.2 The College recognises the risk that institutions holding human remains may be seen to use legislation framed to safeguard collections for the public good as a means of avoiding debate over restitution claims. The RCS has addressed this concern within its own policy review.
- 5.3 Although the RCS collections are of great scientific value, they are not the object of significant current research. The principal current justification for the collections rests with their value for medical education and for the history of medicine. This does not imply that similar collections cannot be justified by virtue of their research use, only that such justifications should rest upon demonstrable evidence. It also does not preclude the future research potential of RCS collections as techniques develop.

Revised May 2002