



Can I Donate My Body to Science?

"Although there are not any fundamental moral objections to donating our bodies to science, certain details of how the donation is carried out are important."



Some people may wish to “donate their body to science” after they die. Such a gift of themselves can be objectively good and praiseworthy provided that their body would contribute to meaningful research or study, and that it would not be used in a disrespectful or otherwise inappropriate manner.

There are number of potentially laudable projects that can benefit from a person’s decision to donate his or her body to science. A human cadaver can be useful for anatomical studies, to help train medical students to save lives later. It can be of assistance in carrying out basic biomedical research or in developing new medical instruments. It can be used as a forensic tool to help solve crimes, such as studying advanced states of bodily decay. It can assist with the training of surgeons, and can even help with the development of various types of safety or protective gear, like helmets, automobile airbags or bullet-proof vests.

In 1956, Pope Pius XII noted that consenting to “damage to the integrity of the corpse in the interest of those who are suffering, is no violation of the reverence due to the dead.” St. John Paul II wrote in a 1995 encyclical that one way of nurturing a genuine culture of life “is the donation of organs, per-

formed in an ethically acceptable manner, with a view to offering a chance of health and even of life itself to the sick who sometimes have no other hope” (EV 86). The U.S. Catholic bishops have given similar guidance in their policy document called *The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*:

“Catholic health care institutions should encourage and provide the means whereby those who wish to do so may arrange for the donation of their organs and bodily tissue, for ethically legitimate purposes, so that they may be used for donation and research after death” (No. 63).

Although there are not any fundamental moral objections to donating our bodies to science, certain details of how the donation is carried out are important.

First, bodily remains should be properly interred in the earth at the conclusion of their use. The body should not be surrendered to researchers and then merely “left in limbo.” Often a university or research institution will oversee and pay for the cremation of the body after the re-

Making Sense of Bioethics

Can I Donate My Body to Science?

search is completed, so the family can then be given the ashes. This may be specified in the agreement signed by the individual ahead of time. Assuring appropriate respect and reverence for the body would thus include arranging for burial in consecrated ground afterwards.

A second consideration of importance for Catholics involves the offering of prayers, and particularly the sacrifice of the Mass, on behalf of the deceased. Rev. Edward McNamara, a well-known writer and liturgy professor in Rome, offers some practical guidance in this regard:

“Since it is usually impossible to have a funeral with the remains shortly after death, as this would render the body unsuitable for research purposes, a memorial Mass without the body can be celebrated so as to entrust the soul of the deceased to God and offer the family the opportunity of mourning together. When the remains are released to the family, another Mass may be offered.”

A third potential area of concern involves the possibility that certain cells or tissues derived from the hu-

man body may be inappropriately used in research. To consider one instance, it is possible to harvest sex cells, or their progenitor cells, from corpses even up to a few hours following death. Some researchers might be tempted to use these cells, for example, to create human embryos in the laboratory for biomedical research. Although such practices are uncommon, if an individual believed that his or her cells were likely to be used in this unethical way by a research institution, they should not agree to donate their bodies after death.

Those contemplating the possibility of donating their bodies to science should weigh a fourth consideration as well, namely, whether others in their family are open to their body being utilized in this way. They should find out whether their spouse, children, or others close to them would have any objections or concerns. At the end of the day, there may be some family members who, in the words of one commentator, can't quite get past the idea, “that you will be dissected over a period of months in anatomy class, or cut up and divided among different programs (brain to an Alzheimer's study, joints to an orthopedic surgery training).”

Careful vetting of the details ahead of time helps avoid resentment, pain and surprises after a loved one passes on.

With these caveats and considerations in mind, donating a body to science can indeed allow someone to “give back” or “contribute to society” after death.

Rev. Tadeusz Pacholczyk, Ph.D. earned his doctorate in neuroscience from Yale and did post-doctoral work at Harvard. He is a priest of the diocese of Fall River, MA, and serves as the Director of Education at The National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia. Father Tad writes a monthly column on timely life issues. From stem cell research to organ donation, abortion to euthanasia, he offers a clear and compelling analysis of modern bioethical questions, addressing issues we may confront at one time or another in our daily living. His column, entitled “Making Sense of Bioethics” is nationally syndicated in the U.S. to numerous diocesan newspapers, and has been reprinted by newspapers in England, Canada, Poland and Australia.

