

VIEWPOINT

The legacy of Gunther von Hagens: Reflections on an anatomist and innovator who challenged the ethical boundaries of anatomy

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Abstract

Gunther von Hagens, who died on July 24, 2026, was a controversial figure whose influence on anatomy extends well beyond the Body Worlds exhibitions of plastinated human tissues for which he became internationally known. His work raised the public profile of anatomy, though it generated significant debate. Much of the academic discussion of his work has focused on ethical concerns surrounding the sourcing and display of plastinated human tissues, as well as his decision to undertake public dissection of a donor. These issues remain important, but they can obscure the extent to which his innovations using plastination techniques changed the possibilities for preserving and teaching human anatomy. Plastinated specimens are now used in anatomy education and research in institutions around the world, providing durable and transportable educational resources while also extending access to anatomical specimens. Von Hagens also had an unintended influence on the development of ethics in anatomy, whereby the controversy surrounding his work brought anatomy into public and academic discussions, prompting ongoing discourse around the ethical boundaries of working with human tissues. Because of these multiple influences, any legacy attached to von Hagens' remains difficult to balance. The anatomy community should recognize the significance of his contribution while continuing to examine the ethical questions that accompanied it.

KEYWORDS

anatomy, education, ethics, healthcare education, plastination

The passing of 81-year-old German anatomist Gunther von Hagens on July 24, 2026, has been globally publicized via mainstream media sources. These pieces tell a variety of stories and guide narratives around his life and controversies from a public perspective, without speaking about his influence on the anatomy community. Indeed, many stories focus on the impact of the international traveling shows of plastinated bodies in the Body Worlds exhibits, von

Hagens' undertaking a public dissection of a donor in the United Kingdom in 2002,¹ and other controversies.² This is perhaps a one-sided view, and one which the anatomy community should balance by providing further perspective.

Von Hagens clearly courted controversy and did not shy away from it. Indeed, it appeared as though it was his *modus operandi* to challenge both the views of anatomists and the general public. Ethical

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concerns followed his work: unclear sourcing and international exchange of anatomical bodies,³ questionable consent practices,⁴ the public dissection episode, the touring Body Worlds exhibits,⁵ and the establishment of museums with plastinated bodies sometimes posed in provocative ways⁶ all made headlines. These were serious concerns, challenging social standards and sometimes testing the limits of the law. Media headlines were generated, scholars from many disciplines ranging from anatomy to the fine arts, religion and philosophy were variously outraged or laudatory, and the public was actively engaged with reactions between fascination and disgust. Legitimate ethical questions still remain around von Hagens' work and are actively discussed by anatomists and ethicists to this day.⁷

Amidst the ethical turmoil and adverse publicity, von Hagens' work continued. Behind the public face of Body Worlds, the plastination technique and innovations he developed in the late 1970s have found their way into anatomy curricula worldwide. The technique of plastination is used globally within academia and research, with many institutions establishing their own facilities to enable donor bodies and tissues to be plastinated. The International Society for Plastination, co-founded by von Hagens in 1986, provides an academic hub for those interested in the technique. This widespread adoption has had a profound influence on the teaching of anatomy. Anatomical displays can now be made that are durable, easily transported, and do not require specialist storage in the same fashion as wet tissue dissections derived from body donors.⁸ As a result, institutions that have limited access to body donors or dissection facilities are able to access uniquely human materials.⁹ These developments have made plastination one of the most influential recent innovations in modern anatomy education.

Somewhat paradoxically, von Hagens' most impactful contribution to the anatomy profession may well have been the controversy itself. Around the world, anatomy has been thrust into the limelight wherever there are Body Worlds or similar exhibits of plastinated human tissues. Persons who had previously never heard of anatomy as a discipline became aware that being an "anatomist" was a career. At the same time, these persons have likely been exposed to the ethical issues surrounding plastination and public display of the dead due to the resulting media coverage and controversy. The field of "ethics in anatomy" recognizes that von Hagens has contributed to some of its recent momentum with its emergence and legitimacy underpinned by discussions around both von Hagens and the plastination technique. This is an unintended, but real, contribution by von Hagens—his work has undoubtedly raised the public profile of the discipline of anatomy while also being a topic of focus for ethics scholars in this field.^{7,10,11}

Understanding von Hagens' legacy necessitates consideration of the researcher, innovator, and showman. His influence on anatomy arguably rests less on his own discovery of new anatomical knowledge than on changing how anatomical material could be preserved, handled, and presented. As an innovator, his impact was profound: plastination extended the possibilities of anatomical preparation, teaching, and display. However, the innovator cannot be separated entirely from the showman, both in the literal sense of exhibiting anatomy and in his deliberate use of spectacle. Yet, that same willingness to challenge convention and generate controversy also

carried plastination far beyond the anatomy department. Whether the technique would have achieved the same reach without the public persona that accompanied it remains unclear.

Von Hagens is a difficult figure to characterize. How we treat his memory should, however, model the values that the discipline of anatomy professes to embody. The anatomy community's ethical maturity will be reflected in how we remember von Hagens and his contributions. We should balance his innovations and controversies, based on historical fact, that are proportional and fair to a complicated person who was human, neither to be demonized nor canonized. The legacy of Gunther von Hagens compels those of us in the discipline to reflect on our own standards, to recognize his contributions, and to continue the ethical scrutiny he provoked.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Jon Cornwall: Project administration; writing – review and editing; writing – original draft; conceptualization. **Sabine Hildebrandt:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Thomas H. Champney:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Jason M. Organ:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Jon Cornwall, Sabine Hildebrandt, and Thomas H. Champney are all members of the Federative International Committee for Ethics and Medical Humanities (FICEM), the ethics committee of the International Federation of Associations of Anatomists. Jon Cornwall is the Chair of FICEM. Sabine Hildebrandt is a member of the Human Remains in Harvard Museum Collections Research Review Committee. She receives royalties from her book *"The Anatomy of Murder."* Thomas H. Champney was a member of the American Anthropological Association's Ethical Treatment of Human Remains Commission. Thomas H. Champney oversees the South Florida Body Donation Program, is entrusted with the care of human remains in this programme and serves on the University of Miami's Anatomical Advisory Committee. He receives royalties from Wiley Publishers for "Essential Clinical Neuroanatomy." Jon Cornwall and Sabine Hildebrandt are Associate Editors for, and Jason Organ is Editor in Chief of, Anatomical Sciences Education.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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