

# The Use of Unclaimed Bodies in Medical Education

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# Procurement

The human bodies and body parts that are used for teaching and training in the United States come from three primary sources:

1. Donors via academic body donation programs or state anatomical boards
2. Donors via private “body brokers”
3. Unclaimed bodies

# What (who) is an unclaimed body?

Human remains that have been positively identified but for whom no one has stepped forward to arrange for burial or cremation.

The county in which an unclaimed person dies is typically responsible for the disposition of their body.

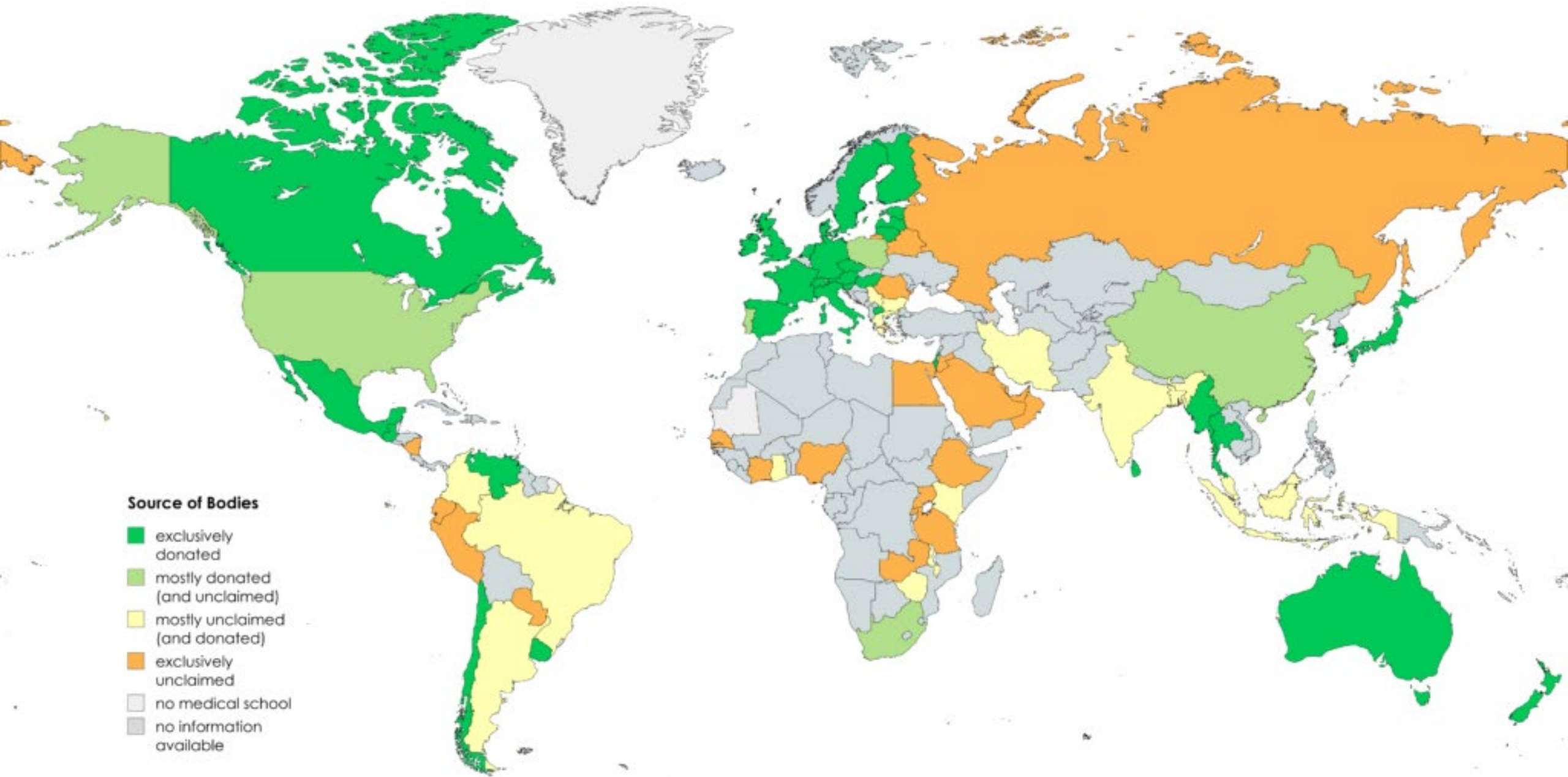
# Legality

In most parts of the United States\*, including Florida, it is legal for counties to offer unclaimed bodies to medical schools and other institutions of higher learning, where they then are used in teaching and research.

\*Some exceptions are Hawaii, Vermont, and Minnesota. New York has also banned the practice in cities with populations of greater than one million.

# Legality

In essentially all the jurisdictions where the 'donation' of unclaimed bodies is legal, it is permitted even without the prior consent of the deceased or permission from their next of kin.



# How common is this practice in the US?

2019 survey of anatomy course leaders at US medical schools (Caplan & DeCamp): **12.4%** indicated the possible use of unclaimed bodies at their institution.

Response rate was **61%**; self-selection is a possibility

## Figure 1: Use of Unclaimed Bodies at Texas Medical Schools (2017-2021)

Data collected through public information requests and queries to private institutions

Direct Procurement and Use

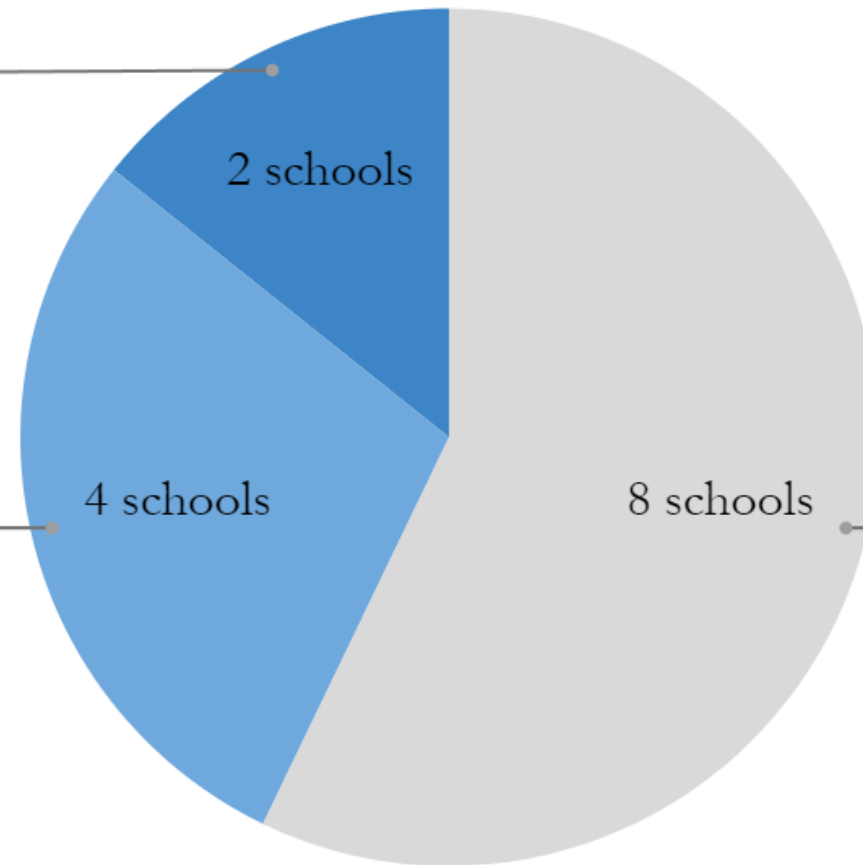
14.3%

Possible Use

28.6%

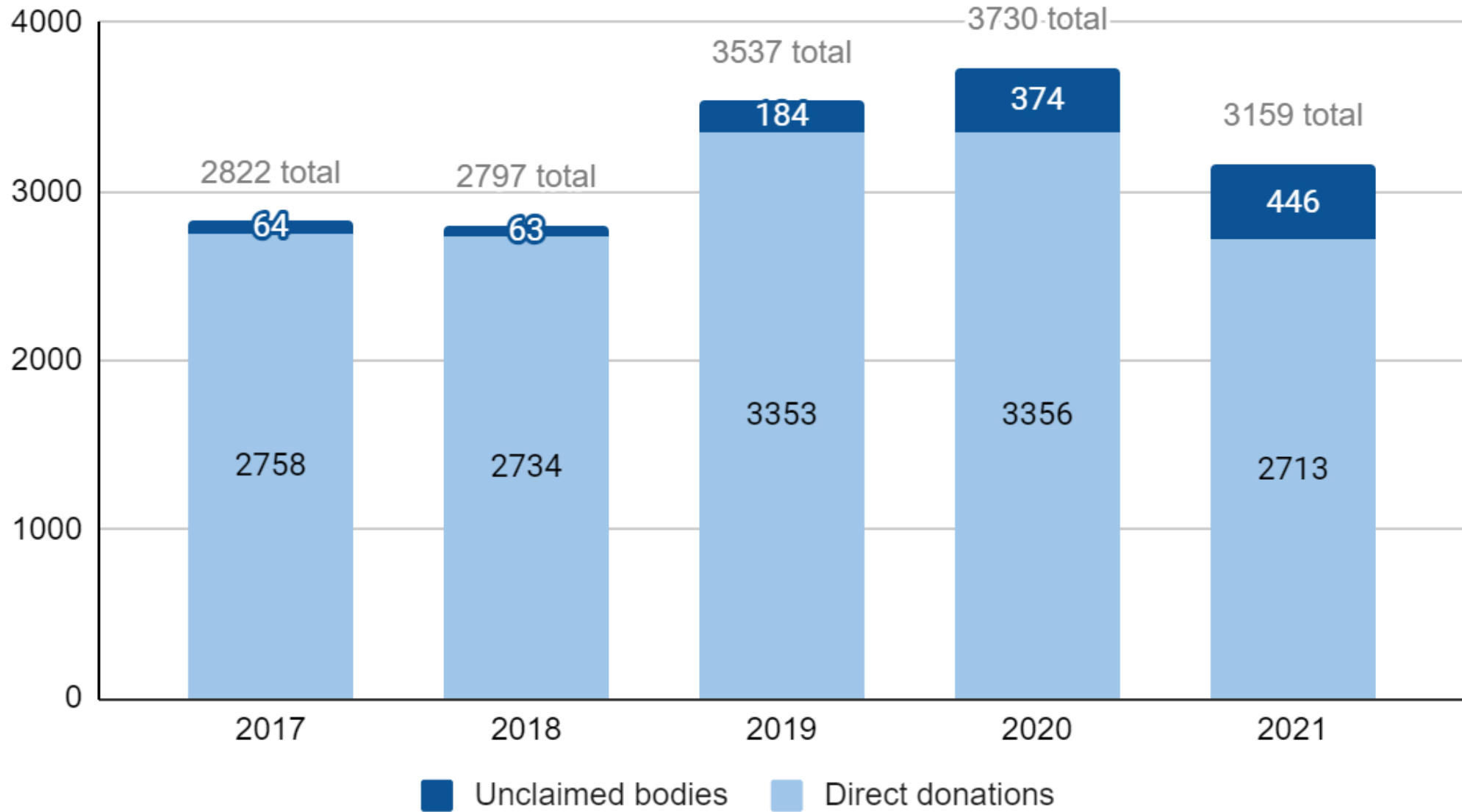
No Use

57.1%





# Whole-Body Donations in Texas



# No shortage of willing donors

70% of programs receive enough bodies, 17% receive a surplus, and 13% receive too few.\*

As Tom Champney (UMiami) puts it, scarcity is a “red herring”.

# What's the incentive?

Cost-savings for the counties and, in some cases, profit for the institutions

# Increasing public attention



## DEALING THE DEAD

### **Cut up and leased out, the bodies of the poor suffer a final indignity in Texas**

The University of North Texas Health Science Center built a flourishing business using hundreds of unclaimed corpses. It suspended the program after NBC News exposed failures to treat the dead and their families with respect.

# The unconsented use of the unclaimed needs to end.

At a moral minimum, medical schools should refuse to accept unclaimed bodies in the absence of either the prior consent of the deceased or explicit permission from their next of kin.

# The plan

I will present **four arguments** against accepting unclaimed bodies.

I will present **two counterarguments** to defenses of the practice.

# Argument 1: Consent

The unclaimed dead have not consented to dissection, nor can we justify the use of their bodies on the basis of *presumed* consent.

# Argument 2: Direct harm

Harm to the deceased? Maybe.

Harm to the living? Assuredly.

- Loved ones
- Communities
- Medical students



# Argument 3: Justice

The people whose bodies go unclaimed are disproportionately those that have faced marginalization, discrimination, and economic hardship in life.

The injustice here is racial as well as economic.

# Argument 4: Public trust

As the systematic use of unclaimed bodies comes to light, public trust in health care and medical professionals may be damaged.

This has foreseeable downstream consequences, *e.g.*,

- The exacerbation of existing health inequalities
- Decreased compliance with emergency public health measures
- Lower rates of participation in medical research
- Lower rates of voluntary organ donation

# Counterargument: The Stewardship Argument

1. Access to bodies is importantly beneficial to medical education.
2. There is currently more demand for bodies than there is supply.
3. Accordingly, bodies are a scarce and valuable resource.
4. Therefore, the procurement and use of unclaimed bodies in teaching is permissible on the basis of responsible resource stewardship.

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1. The donation of unclaimed bodies to medical science is ethically permissible in cases where the preferences of the deceased are unknown.
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3. So why not donate them?

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This is sloppy and lazy decision theory – it ignores best practices for both proxy decision-making and reasoning under uncertainty.

(For one, it inaccurately assigns all possible preferences the same credence. It also treats all possible preference violations as equally serious.)

# Take-home message

The use of unclaimed bodies in medical teaching and research is morally unacceptable. At a minimum, body donation programs should insist on the prior consent of the deceased or the explicit permission of their next of kin.

## 'Dealing the Dead' sparks change

- University of North Texas Health Science Center responded to NBC News' reporting by suspending its body donation program, firing the people who ran it, hiring an outside consultant to investigate the program's operations and announcing it would [stop using bodies without consent](#).
- Institutions that received parts of unclaimed bodies from the Health Science Center said they had done so unknowingly and would now examine their operations. [They include Johnson & Johnson, Boston Scientific and the Army](#).
- State Sen. Tan Parker, a Republican whose district includes parts of Tarrant and Dallas counties, [said he would introduce a bill](#) in January to prohibit the use of people's bodies unless they or their survivors give full consent.
- Tarrant County began publishing names of unclaimed people on the [National Missing and Unidentified Persons System](#), a free public database [meant to connect the dots](#) between reports of missing people and unclaimed bodies.



There's nothing special about Texas.

Unclaimed bodies are still in use all over the country.

This is a national issue.

# A need for regulation

State and even federal legislation should be put in place to prohibit the use of unclaimed bodies in medical teaching and research. In the absence of these regulations, counties can adopt policies against the practice.

In the meantime, institutions of higher learning should divest.

\*See Balta *et al.* (2025): Human body donation programs best practices and recommended standards: A task force report from the American Association for Anatomy. *Anat Sci Educ.*

# Institutional divestment

1. A commitment to transparency
2. Removal of unclaimed bodies currently in use
3. Dignified cremation or burial of the above
4. Adoption of policies specifying minimum ethical standards for whole body procurement and establishment of an anatomical oversight committee.\*

*...But note that the perfect is the enemy of the good – institutions can still make moral progress even while, situationally, deferring to pragmatics on particular action items.*

\*See Balta *et al.* (2025): Human body donation programs best practices and recommended standards: A task force report from the American Association for Anatomy. *Anat Sci Educ.*

# Paper

If you'd like to explore this issue in greater detail, an expanded version of this work is forthcoming at the *Journal of Medical Ethics* and should be out in a few weeks.

You can also contact me for a draft at [eli.shupe@uta.edu](mailto:eli.shupe@uta.edu).