

DONATING A BODY FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH: MIKE FOSSEY, CUMBRIA

"Fell-walking is a lifelong interest, I like to get out once or twice a week." Mike Fossey, a retired Chemistry teacher, looks fit and healthy, and it's easy to imagine him striding up the Cumbrian hill-sides. The fells are referred to in a rather different context later; we have been talking about cremation - Mike's mother's ashes are sprinkled near her favourite viewpoint by Crummock Water - and Mike says, "I've been surprised at how often I see ashes on the fells. Rannerdale Knott is quite a popular place, I've seen them there two or three times, and a few on Haystacks."(In future I shall look out for whitish flakes, "six to seven millimetres" in size, and try to avoid stepping on them.)

Mike's body will not be cremated intact after his death because he believes strongly that a dead human body can still be useful. Since there is a shortage of human bodies for anatomy teaching and research, he has donated his body to Newcastle University's Medical School for this purpose. "It seems to me so clear that if we want well-trained medical folk, they should have bodies to work on, not just for anatomy but especially for looking at pathology. I'm pleased that my body will be used as an object for someone to learn anatomy, or for examples of pathology or normal tissue."

In the event of accidental death - if he had "the misfortune to drive into a bus", as he puts it - the Medical School would be unlikely to want his body but, since he is also on the Organ Donor Register, some of his organs might still be useful. "I heard a transplant surgeon say that kidneys could be used up until age 84, which surprised me and encouraged me to know that bits of me might still be of use even then."

There is an interesting dichotomy here: some people might be willing to donate their live organs - eyes, kidney, liver - after death, yet balk at the idea of donating their body for research. "If you're donating organs you're doing something for another person, to help keep them living - it's very different," Mike says. With live organs there is that one-to-one immediacy: someone has come off dialysis or can see again.

But organs and tissues are also very useful for research purposes. The difference here is that no single person will have immediate gain, but any information that those organs provide will be added to a larger bank of data which may (or may not) benefit people in the future.

"I felt rather irritated about the Sellafield business and the anger in West Cumbria because various organs had been removed and kept," Mike tells me. "The only way to look at the long-term picture [of the effect of radiation] is by taking samples. Our liver and lungs are no use to us when we're dead. If possible you should still make use of a body you've lived in for a good long time."

The "Sellafield business" refers to the period 1961-1992 when pathologists and mortuary technicians at the West Cumbrian Infirmary, Whitehaven, removed a wide variety of organs and bone from 64 Sellafield workers and 12 workers from other nuclear sites, during both Coroner's and hospital *post mortems*, and sent them to the Chief Medical Officers at British Nuclear Fuels Ltd (as it was then called) for radiochemical and other analyses. Many research papers on, for example, epidemiological data of the effect of radiation, resulted from the long-term research and were published in academic journals. However, the organs and tissues had been removed without consent of the relatives or the deceased, and not only was this surprising revelation distressing to relatives, it was also illegal within the terms of the Human Tissue Act 1961. This came to light in 2005 and the results of the Public Inquiry are succinctly summarised [in the report of the Chairman, Mr Michael Redfern QC](#).

Redfern is very clear about who was to blame, and although families were very angry and upset at the "disrespect" towards, and even "mutilation" of, their relatives' bodies, what is particularly poignant is his statement that, "Inevitably some (of the families), had they been asked and given detailed information at the time, would have agreed that the organs could be removed and analysed."

It is this question of consent that is so important: it gives not only choice, but also dignity to the donors and their families. The Human Tissue Act 2004 and, in Scotland, the Anatomy Act 1984, are unambiguous on the matter of patient and donor consent. The information is freely available: websites such as the [Human Tissue Authority](#) have details, contacts and FAQs. If you wish to donate your body and organs for research, you can even download an application form.

Mike Fossey rang up the office of the School of Medical Education Development at Newcastle University and they sent him the forms. Mike lives in North-West Cumbria: "If you live more than 35 miles away you have to agree to pay for transport of your body, and this has to be written into your Will." (Obviously a taxi won't do.) "The undertaker has to keep your body cool while the Medical School decide whether they want it - I haven't had the undertaker's estimate for that yet. But it's probably fairly expensive!" When he dies, the Medical School can refuse to take his body if it's not suitable. "They'll phone my GP to check whether my body's still worth having. They have the right to reject you. It could take several days - and this is probably interesting for the people who might or might not be arranging a funeral for you!" Under the Human Tissue Act 2004, if you donate your body it can be retained for a maximum of three years or, with your prior consent, for as long as the Medical School needs it; for example it might be kept as a reference set for organs with a particular pathology. Whatever remains of the body after the Medical School has used it, they arrange for its cremation or burial; in Mike's case this would be in Newcastle. "The family or executors can reclaim it and 'do their own thing', but I had a conversation with our daughters and they didn't think they'd want to bring the

bits back. But I have specified the special reading and one piece of music for the cremation."

Back in Cumbria he would like someone to arrange "a memorial or celebration of some sort. I haven't actually discussed it with the children but I think I'd like a concert with a string quartet to which my friends could come."

Mike's decision to donate his body for research was prompted by the death, in the USA, of a good friend who had cancer of the bile duct. The friend had had to keep working to pay his medical bills because his insurance didn't cover the costs; he donated his body, an example of the widespread metastasis of tumours, as an exhibit for teaching purposes.

As a body-donor you have control over how your body is treated, Mike tells me: "You can say you don't want bits to be seen, you can place restrictions."

How different from the situation of "[Janet](#)", part of Charles Bell's Collection in the Surgeons' Hall Museum, Edinburgh, and of the "[Giant O'Brien](#)", who became part of John Hunter's Collection in the Royal College of Surgeons, England. In both their cases, their bodies were stolen after death and "macerated" to reveal the anatomical and developmental defects in their skeletons; they stand, the short and the tall, in their respective Museums.

Mike has been interested in science and medicine since childhood, when he liked to dissect some of the "offal" that was brought home from the butcher's for cooking: pig's heads (boiled for brawn), sheep's hearts (stuffed and eaten), and lungs. He wonders whether this influenced his decision to donate his body, because it later became clear to him that hands-on experience was important for understanding anatomy. These days, as well as fell-walking, he is also busy running art history groups, and is very interested in theatre and music, so it's easy to see why he also has had an interest in skeletons and anatomy. "I had great ambitions of burying a dead cat or chicken and getting the skeleton ... I enjoy bones from a sculptural point of view. Some of them are so delicate, the way the light shines through, and yet they have evolved so beautifully to bear loads. I have some on a window-sill upstairs and I propose to draw or model them sometime - Henry Moore used bones as an inspiration."

So would he like to have his body plastinated and exhibited, like Gunther von Hagen's anatomical artworks? He laughs, "'If I had a beautiful body I wouldn't mind! My only reservation would be for my relatives and friends, my own point of view would be of no concern at all.'

(C) Ann Lingard and Mike Fossey