

Interview with Professor Gordon Findlater

Short Introduction

Judith: Hello everyone and welcome to our interview series on how body donation for anatomical examination is regulated in different countries.

Today we have the pleasure of hosting Professor Gordon Findlater, who's His Majesty's Inspector of Anatomy for Scotland and will take us through regulation of anatomical donations in Scotland.

Professor Findlater, please introduce yourself and tell us briefly about your past experience and being involved with cadaveric anatomy activities and your current involvement.

Gordon: Ok, well thank you very much Judith. Well, as you said at least, my name is Gordon Findlater and up until 2016 I taught anatomy at Edinburgh University for the best part of 35 years and latterly retired as professor, now Emeritus Professor of Translational Anatomy at the university.

In the time I was at Edinburgh, due to staffing issues, I landed embalmed bodies and was also the bequest coordinator there for several years, so I've got a pretty broad knowledge background of anatomical things, I would say. In addition to my current role Emeritus Professor, I gave up the job recently as Wade Professor of Surgical Anatomy at the College of Surgeons at Edinburgh. And as you mentioned, I'm now His Majesty's Inspector for Scotland and I've been doing that job since 2018 and I'm also now Inspector of Burial, Cremation and Funeral Directors for Scotland as well.

So very much involved with death, dying and dead bodies. I think it's pretty much summarised my background.

Judith: Thank you very much, Professor Findlater we will hear more about this in the full interview which will be published on the EFEM website, and you can follow the link associated with this video to view this.

Thank you.

Full Interview

Ourania: Hello everyone and welcome to our second interview on how body donation for anatomical examination is regulated in different countries. Today we have the pleasure of hosting Professor Gordon Findlater, who is His Majesty's Inspector of Anatomy for Scotland. Gordon, thank you for joining our interview series. And we will start with our first question. So, Gordon, how long has donation of a body for anatomical examination been active in your country, and how widespread is the knowledge that this is possible?

Gordon: Well, I suppose in Scotland, like the rest of United Kingdom, it goes back as far as 1832 when the Anatomy Act was introduced. I mean, I taught in Edinburgh for a number of years and Edinburgh has the dubious background of having Burke & Hare who murdered people for the supply of bodies to medical schools. And it's a consequence of the Burke & Hare scandal. The government of the day decided that they would have to do something to legislate the supply of bodies to medical schools, so they introduced the anatomy act of 1832, and so bodies have been getting donated to medical schools since 1832. The Act basically said it was

unclaimed bodies that went to medical schools.

Which means if you died in the street or if you died in the poor house or if you were hanged or you're

hanged and nobody claimed the body, then your body would go to the anatomy department.

And

that was the case right up until pretty much 1984 when there was a

revision of the act, but in 2006 when the act was further revised you had to donate your body, you had to fill in a form in life. And as long as you had that form in place, then your body may be accepted by an anatomy department. But prior to 2006, I used to say you had no rights to your own body. You may have wanted your body come to medical school, but if any of your family objected to that possibility, then your body would not come to us.

Conversely, it might never cross your mind to leave your body to the medical school, but if somebody in your family thought this was a good idea, then they could. They could donate your body to a medical school.

Ourania: And our second question is who can accept a donation and how many donations centres are there in Scotland?

Gordon: That's, there's five medical schools in Scotland, all with anatomy departments. So bodies are donated to medical schools. So there are five places in Scotland where they will accept bodies. And it's anatomy departments that accept them. Bodies go to College of Surgeons, but they can't accept bodies and they have to go through anatomy departments. You know, they have the, they have the, the correct processes in place for receiving bodies.

Ourania: And if a person Gordon wants to donate his or her body, what do they have to do?

Gordon: Well they have to make it known that this is something they want to do. They have to contact their local medical school. Now Scotland's a large, well it's not large by international standards,

but it's a fairly scattered county with five medical schools and so they have to know of the possibility of a

medical school accepting their body. So they have to get in touch with their nearest medical school and they will send out a bequest form, which has to be completed and witnessed by someone who's known to the donor and their wish to donate their

body is then recorded were kept on file and so long as that forms in place then at the time of their death the department may or may not accept the body, but that form must be in place. No, there's no way of accepting a body without that form being filled in and completed.

Ourania: And can a relative or a friend donate a person's body after death.

Gordon: You know, that's a common question. People have, they may have what's called the right of

attorney over a deceased, but and they think that that gives them the right to donate a body. It doesn't. OK, you have to, the person who wishes to donate a body must complete the form. It has to be their wish to leave their body. And nobody else can leave somebody else's body to medical school. That's just not possible. Even if it you know so I mean I should have also maybe say it

can be accepted if it is in their will. OK. That is we. We would prefer that they filled in a donor form, but if it's written into the will, and that will is witnessed, as wills are, then we will

accept the body if it's written into the will.

Ourania: And is body donation for anatomical examination compatible with organ donation or with a postmortem examination in Scotland.

Gordon: Definitely not with postmortem examination because the you know, the bodies get embalmed or may be frozen and it depends what the body is

going to be used for. But the once organs have been removed, major organs have been removed or a postmortem has been carried out then it makes embalming process pretty much impossible to be fair. If you have corneas removed then that's a different thing, OK, that doesn't disrupt the body to any great extent and consequently if corneas have been donated then it's possible to still accept the body but if major, major organs have been removed or if a postmortem has been carried out generally the body wouldn't be accepted by an anatomy department.

Ourania: And roughly what costs are involved in running a body donation program in Scotland and generally using the bodies?

Gordon: It's a fairly expensive process actually. that the when somebody dies and leaves a body to

medical school then the costs are covered by that that medical school by the anatomy department. The

exception to that rule would be if somebody dies out with, you might say, the area the local medical school area then the charge of

transporting the body to that medical school would pass to the next of kin of the deceased. But the costs involved will be funeral directors, costs for the uplift of the body from wherever, could be care home could be an actual

person's house, hospital, but to be taken to the anatomy department. Then there's embalming costs and if you, if you look, there's technical costs involved, technical time, embalming fluids. I did a calculation

a few years ago now, but I reckoned the cost of receiving a body into an anatomy department, probably about 10 years ago was £1000. Between accepting of the body and its subsequent disposal to the crematorium,

again, that's another cost that's involved, there's a cremation cost. If

somebody wants to have the body back, which is a possibility, then they would be expected to cover the cost of the funeral. But by and large the

medical school anatomy department covers the costs of accepting and dealing with a body.

Ourania: And what information is generally requested from a potential donor and what are the acceptance criteria?

Gordon: Obviously, at the time of

death, we'd like to know the cause of death, because there may be certain, you

know, health conditions that might stop us accepting a body of some highly infectious disease. But generally speaking we would like to know of any

previous operations which might interfere with us accepting a body. It's also quite useful to know if they've had procedures carried out in the body such

as knee replacements, hip replacements. It's not the first time that I sent a body across the College of Surgeons for a knee replacement course to find that the cadaver actually had two replacement knees already and so it's nice to

know previous history. The more sensitive issue is size of a donor, if they're very small or very large. I

mean if they're very small then the anatomy is quite, you know, difficult to, you know, to work with. If

they're very large, it's just physically handling the body, technical staff have issues physically handling bodies. Although we're getting more requests now from surgeons to have larger bodies because that's what they're finding they're doing surgery on.

But it's very difficult to ask somebody the next of kin of a deceased, you know, how, how big or how small was is the potential donor. It's quite, it's

quite awkward. Funeral director are not always very honest when they ask, when

you ask their opinion, how you know the size of an individual, you don't always get a true answer, I have to say. And these are the primary, primary questions we've asked. The size and any illnesses that they may be suffering from or any previous surgeries etcetera.

Ourania: And how long are the remains allowed to be kept in the anatomical institution before being buried or cremated?

Gordon: Well the anatomy act which governs pretty much what we do. It says that our bodies must be disposed of within a three- year period. Now you're allowed to retain parts providing the donor has given consent for the retention of parts then we can retain parts but and it's not written into the act but it's generally accepted that a greater part of that body must go for disposal within a period of three years. And it's questionable as to how much you can dispose of and how much you keep but it's kind of an unwritten rule that as long as the greater part of the body is disposed of in three-year, a three-year period, you can retain parts as I said providing the donor has given consent for the retention of parts.

Ourania: And on a similar note, how is imaging regulated in Scotland?

Gordon: Now that is a good question because there's lots of debate as to what you can and can't do. And there was a meeting of the Scottish anatomists a few years ago now at Saint Andrews University where it was decided that. If provided that consent had been given by the donor for images to be taken and kept, providing the anonymity of the deceased could be maintained, and providing it, provided it was in the bounds of common decency. Then images could be taken. Now it's not just a case of taking an image in any old camera. It has to be a camera which is being is dedicated to the purpose of taking images. Anybody taking images have to sign forms to say what images they've taken. Then a licensed teacher anatomy has to check what image has been taken and they have the final veto on what images can be kept and what images should be should not be kept. But I mean my whole approach as inspector, is to allow things to happen not to. Stop things happening and consequently, if taking images allow things to progress and provided they meet the criteria, as I said of consent, being granted anonymity and common decency, then I think taking images is acceptable.

Ourania: And what happens to a body after anatomical examination has been completed?

Gordon: Well, there are three options. There's cremation without further reference to the family, cremation with reference, you know, passing the, you know, ashes on the family or potentially the return of the body to the family. I would say in my experience, never was I in the 35 years in anatomy, never did anyone request the body back. But I would say 75% of all donors and their family, they tick the box saying cremation without further reference to the family. In which case the ashes were scattered in the crematorium in the garden of rest in the crematorium. The remaining 25%, the family would be contacted by a funeral director and asked them and they would be then asked to collect the ashes. And if you were to ask me, why did the majority of people not want to have the ashes back. Then, I think if you, you know, when somebody dies, it's quite traumatic, it's quite upsetting. And three years down the line, maybe you're not too keen to get a phone call from the anatomy department or a funeral director, look, we've got the ashes of mum, dad, granny, granddad. You kind of got over the idea that they've passed

away. And so they go through the grieving process at the time, and they're happy for the ashes just to be disposed of by the crematorium.

Ourania: And how many donations are there on average, considering all the institutions you mentioned in Scotland.

Gordon: And that's, I keep saying that's a good question, but it's a good question because part of my job was to carry out annual inspections of anatomy departments and up until recently nobody take collected any data. We just visited and said, yeah, that's fine, they're doing everything grand. But I thought I would start collecting some data and I've only got figures for two years, OK. So it's hardly, you know, it's not exactly significant statistically OK, but this current year and discipline inspection just completed, there were 388 bodies in the five different anatomy departments. Now for the last year, which is an odd year because we're just coming out of the pandemic, we had 280. So a kind of average about 300 plus bodies are actually in medical schools at this moment in time, some in them, some frozen. Depends what they're, they're use is going to be.

Ourania: This is very useful to know and which regulatory body, oversees Anatomical examination and what is the procedure for that in Scotland?

Gordon: Well we're governed by an act. It's, it's I wrote it down actually because it was very long winded. It's the Anatomy Act (Scotland) as amended by the Human Tissue Act 2016. OK but basically it's the Anatomy Act was a standalone act 1832 Act, revised in 1984. But the Human Tissue Act was introduced in 2016 and embedded in that is the Anatomy Act. And so that's what regulates pretty much what we do, but. There's the Anatomy Act, which is what I've referred to there. There's a Code of Practice which is basically interpretation of the Act and it makes sense of the Act is how I would

put it because the Act is pretty very legalistic, it's quite hard to follow but as a code of practice extracts the main points from the Act and basically it helps you understand what you're meant to be doing. And then there's the Regulations and the Regulations are what you're legally obliged to do and they are, it's primarily, what data you have

to collect with regards to body donations, the name, of the deceased, when they arrived and you know, parts retained, etcetera. So it lists quite clearly the sort of the detailed data that you have to collect for each donation.

Another thing I should mention the Code of Practice is not, it's not the regulated at the moment. In other words, it's it's what we would like you to do. But at the moment the Code of Practice is going through Parliament to make it statutory. In other words, it will no longer be voluntary, it will be what you have to do. Which I think is probably the right thing. Should be doing it, then you should be doing it.

Ourania: And on that note, Gordon, how is licensing regulated at the level of each of the five institutions that we have in Scotland?

Gordon: Well it's, basically they way it works is that anatomy departments have to be licensed OK, and you have put through and to retain bodies you have to have what are called licensed premises. Within the license premises every area where bodies will be used, could be dissecting room, it could be a receiving room where the bodies come into the department. But anywhere where remains may end up, put it that

way, then they must be licensed, premises must be licensed and up until now in fact there was no

reminder of a premises licence. It lasted 10 years. So at the end of 10 years, you were expected to remind, remember that your license was due for renewal and a number of departments that tipped over into the illegal side because they suddenly found that their license was no longer valid. But I'm looking to introduce a reminder to let people know that their license is due for renewal now that's the license premises. And you can apply for a personal license because those people who day in daily work with cadavers and bodies then they have can have a personal license and that allows them to have remains in their possession and that gives them permission to have to work with bodies and donors.

It also gives them the authority to give other non licensed people it allows them to have access to

cadavers and that's why medical students who are not licensed can actually work with cadavers because they're in the presence of a licensed teacher.

Ourania: That's very useful to know and who can use the donated bodies in Scotland.

Gordon: Well, it's generally accepted in medical students are the ones that get, you know, get access to bodies. But there there's a lot going on in the Scottish universities, which I'm hoping to highlight in my report that's coming out very soon. Hopefully. And I'm going to summarize basically the work that's going on out with just teaching medical students, but primarily medical students, postgraduate doctors, surgeons in particular, surgeons in training, they have access to cadavers, but there's a lot of research going on which is not generally known by the public. You know there's robotic surgery now, surgical techniques being practiced, you know, yeah, as I said, it's quite an extensive list of things that are going on in medical schools and the colleges of surgeons using cadavers and as I said it's not generally known. I would like to publicize it more because I think I think the body donor program would benefit from people knowing just how wide widely bodies are actually used. I often highlight the situation where I was approached by a surgeon who was carrying out a very difficult procedure was about to carry out a very difficult procedure in a very young gentleman, 22 year old, young man dying of osteosarcoma. And they wanted access to cadaver just to work out the approach to this this, this sarcoma and how they might remove it. And so I gave them access to a body and the whole surgical team turned up in the anatomy department to work out just exactly how they were going to to do this. And I think it's a great example of how a donated body can actually save a life. It's not just the medical students, it's actually allowing surgeons access to cadavers for all sorts of things.

Ourania: And just to finish off this interview, can you highlight in a few words how important professional behaviours in anatomy facility in the dissecting room in the license premises that we mentioned Gordon?

Gordon: I would say that's absolutely fundamentally important from the first exposure to an anatomy department, the first exposure to cadaver, then they have to sign a code of practice. Every student is expected to sign a code of practice which states very clearly what's expected of them. And right the very top of the list is respect for the deceased. The body donor program depends absolutely on the goodwill of the public and the last thing we need is for anything, you know, to go wrong with that because I mean the reputations are hard won and easily lost and they so respect for the cadaver

and body parts, you know it's not just the it's the remains that's fundamental absolutely. And one of the things I've checked when I do my inspection, so I asked to see the signed codes of practice just to ensure that every student has actually. I don't check every one, obviously, but I do a random check just to make sure that the departments are checking that the students have signed the code of practice.

Yeah, so it's absolutely essential, fundamental to the whole body donor program.

Ourania: And on that important note, we will finish this interview. Thank you very much Professor Gordon

Findlater for joining us to give this interview.

Gordon: Pleasure, thank you very much.

Ourania: And we look forward to the next interview that will be the third for this series. Thank you everyone.

Gordon: Thank you very much.