

Interview with Ao.Univ.Prof. Dr. Erich Brenner

Short Introduction

Paula: Hi everyone and welcome to our interview series on how body donation for anatomical examination is regulated in different countries. Today we have Professor Eric Brenner from the Medical University of Innsbruck who will take us through the regulation of anatomical donations in Austria. Professor Brenner, please introduce yourself and tell us briefly about your past experience in being involved with anatomical cadaveric activities and your current involvement.

Professor Brenner: OK. Because quite a long time back. When I was a medicine student. I joined the team of the anatomy not only as a student but afterwards as a tutor, and I worked already five years while I was studying medicine as a tutor in anatomy teaching. Peer teaching. And this is what I really liked and when I finished medicine I had the opportunity to get the position at anatomy. And it was. From the very beginning I had to teach anatomy, I had to teach with cadavers and so on, and it was about, now, 25 years ago when I took over the responsibility as a kind of Director of the body donation programme. So, what I have to do is to have to hold the contact with the relatives and with potential donors. Whenever a new donor applies for body donation, I will have an interview with this person. Telling them what's awaiting for them, and so on and I also have an also responsible for the final way of our body donors, cremation and burial. So, and of course I'm involved still in teaching with real bodies.

Paula:OK. Thank you very much. We'll hear more about this through the full interview, which will be published on the EFEM website. So, if you want to go and watch it, you can click on the link associated with this video. 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 Erich Brenner from the Medical University of Innsbruck who will take us through the regulation of anatomical donations in Austria. Erich thank you for joining our interview series.

Ourania: And let's start with our first question. So 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?

Professor Brenner: Well, when I remember that the first donation of a body to an anatomical institute, to our institute in Innsbruck, was documented back in the 30s of the last century. This was certainly an exception at that time because at that time unclaimed bodies were the main body procurement but in the late 70s body donation was promoted as the main and finally the only source of body procurement. So, we have increasing numbers of body donation from then on. The framework in Austria is a little bit confusing. We have no general national law for body donation because we have nine federal States and each state has its own legislation for this and we don't have a real legislation for body donation itself but only regulations how to handle human cadaver. On the other hand we have national law giving a person the right to dispose of his remains prior to that. It's I think it's general in almost all countries that somebody can say I want to be cremated I want to be buried without cremation or some people decide I will go to anatomy. It's a really fine thing. Therefore, we have no real law for body donation in Austria. Until a few years ago in Tyrol. The province where my university is located. There was still in the law that unclaimed bodies have to be sent to the Medical University to the anatomy department. We have, we have always refused this. And then the way to work around this was to say to the police every everybody else please look for relatives and please look for relatives and sometimes and we hope that this will take a week or longer, and so then we could say, well we are sorry that you haven't found any relatives but now the body isn't usable anymore for anatomical dissection or things like this. Fortunately, this regulation was abolished in the last reform.

In Vorarlberg which is the most westerly province, the law allows all the relatives to offer the body to an anatomical institute. However, we don't take these donations because we rely that on the informed consent by the donor himself or herself. So, they won't be able to present the body to send to our department to our institution it's quite difficult.

How well known? I think you asked how well-known is the possibility of body donation? I think in general it's quite well known for people who are interested in body donation they have, the formation in their mind that this is possible, and they can get in contact with any of the anatomical departments we have in Austria which have the proper information for doing this. And of course, it depends sometimes a little bit on the families and it depends a little bit on the surrounding on the group where the people are in. So, we have donors which are now in the third generation. So, their grandparents came to the anatomy in Innsbruck, their parents came and now already their children are also applying for becoming body donor.

So, we do not offer the engraving in public but what we do is on All Saints Day we have commemoration service. Almost all in anatomies do have such a commemoration service. So, this is invited publicly and people might get to know there is something going on at the anatomy. Several years ago we had to change to the main lecture hall because we want to do this memorization service commemoration service in the university and not go out for a church or something else so we do it inside. But now we can fill the whole main lecture hall so we have 300, 400 hundred attendants.

Ourania: Thank you very much. And so, following on from that question who can accept a donation and how many donation centres are there in Austria?

Professor Brenner: Well in Austria you can only anatomy departments can accept a donation and we have four public anatomical institutes in Graz, Vienna Linz and Innsbruck and we have three private institutes in Vienna, Krems, and Salzburg.

The Linz Institute does not run body a donation programme itself but cooperates with the institute in Graz in teachings and the students from Linz are sent to Graz for the dissection courses. Also, the private institute in Vienna, that private university does not run a body donation programme right now at the very moment but they are starting to do so. It's quite difficult to get the facilities for storage of the bodies and so on, but they have now an agreement with the city of Vienna that then get the appropriate sites and locations therefore. So, at the moment we have we have five, more or less, separate body donatoin centres.

Ourania: Again, very useful to know and again I would like to follow on from the first question and elaborate a bit more. So, if a person wants to donate his or her body what do they have to do?

Professor Brenner: Of course, the first and most important issue would be to get in contact with appropriate anatomical institute.

Of course, we have a kind of regional limitation so of course persons from the Tyrol could not, cannot apply for Salzburg or for Vienna or for Graz. But the most important thing is for that the person to get in contact with that anatomical institute which is the nearest one and they will inform them what is happening and where. People the first thing they want to know is where will my body be buried afterwards, so we can show them images from an honorary graveyard. We have one of these for cemeteries and then they want sometimes they want to know what will happen? What does it mean to be used for education?

Well they can't imagine what is done in the dissection lab. but what a lot of people do not really understand or see properly is what will be done with the body if it is within a scientific research project. So we can tell them, well, What are the research projects we have done with cadavers and we see, "oh, and if you do research on my body it will be helping actual patients in the hospital. Ohh that's great. Where can I sign?" They are coming up with this.

Well they have to fill out the respective form which is specific for each institute and in some in most cases in the eastern part of Austria they have to pay a small contribution for the later funeral.

Ourania: And again following up from your from the first answer that you gave us very kindly and expanding on that can a relative or friend donate a person's body after death.

Professor Brenner: It can be done in our most westerly province in Vorarlberg. But we won't accept it because of informed consent and Helsinki declaration. In general it can't be done. So it's a personal right to dispose over my body. Which I have during my life which I also have after death.

Ourania: Of course. So now changing the theme a little bit. Is body donation for anatomical examination compatible with organ donation or with postmortem examination in Austria?

Professor Brenner: As we have no legal restrictions, in any case, of course it is possible. And from a family side, it depends what happened.

If we have just taken cornea. Or just take a simple single organ like the heart or things like this. It, that doesn't matter really if you have a organ donor who has given his heart. Of course we can't use him for chest anatomy, topographic anatomy of the chest. Yeah but we can use this cadaver. Uh for extremity topographical situation for the nervous system. We can use this for musculoskeletal anatomy and things like this.

That's the same case for the postmortem examination by the pathologist or forensic medicine. Uh it depends how large the postmortem examination is. Of course if it is forensic examination with unknown deaths caused. There will not be much remaining which anatomy could use. But if that's the pathologists want to verify that they are three tumours in the liver. Well we can use that body of course. So we have what we have in most anatomical institutes in Austria. We have a medical doctor being in charge for checking if the body is acceptable for anatomical use.

Ourania: Again very useful to hear your perspective from Austria and so again going on something that you talked earlier on what costs are involved in running a body donation programme and using the cadavers?

Professor Brenner: Well the first cost of course the transfer of the body from the site of death to the institution. Sometimes there are some minor fees for documents we need. Umm to get them because some of the. Some provinces are taking a fee for allowing funeral homes from abroad to fetch a cadaver. So if you send for instance Funeral Home from Innsbruck to upper Austria we have to pay a small fee that they get their allowance to do this. The next is of course uh the embalming. Which uh. Chemicals sometimes are quite expensive and even obviously cheap cheap chemicals are really expensive if you have to buy them in large blocks. So for instance when we, we do two different, mainly two different embalming methods and one of them uses a lot of ethanol and to get ethanol it's not that easy and it's not that not very cheap.

Umm. The next thing is of course the funeral itself. And we do we cremate our body donors and then they uh, are buried on our honorary graveyard we have.

And of course we have. I think a little bit better terms with the Crematory and with the Crematory but of course it's, we have to pay money therefore and of course we need the a little bit of, we have personnel for body donations, we have a secretary, we have Laboratory assistants. We're dealing with them and we need room and this part of room we have for the donors we have to pay for. And we have a quite good regulation with our university. We have to tell the university what the costs the overall costs for one body, average of course, They order bodies we need for anatomy dissection courses. And we get if we use 40 bodies in the dissection lab we get a reimbursement for 40 bodies. Which makes it quite easy to deal with the others. We do postgraduate courses. Very often in conjunction with some well known firms. If we want to test their implants or things like this and so they will have also to pay the cost for the cadaver and it is quite easy. On the one hand the university paying for and on the other hand for the courses and of course in many cases there is the, some kind of, quite a bit of participation fees or things like this. They were. The main problem we have with this regulation is with the bodies we have for research.

Because uh. Whenever we have to do, we want to do a research project and want to use several cadavers. We have to raise funds to get the money to Get the bodies but as we do this now for several years it's quite well established and everybody knows and we do get the funds. It's very interesting we do get the funds therefore.

Ourania: That's again very useful to know and I'm going to change a little bit against the theme and I'm going to move on from the body donation programme to back to the donor. So what information do you request from a potential donor and what are the acceptance criteria?

Professor Brenner: The most important issues of course, date, date of birth, date of death and the cause of death. We try to get the death certificate. Which in most cases we get that, there are some doctors abroad with the inspector to the coroners job which are not very eager to hand out their documents to the anatomy. But in most cases it's not a problem. We are not looking for the medical history for a, from the patient. Because you get too much information which is not really relevant. To know the patient had ten years ago a severe flu, doesn't change anatomy so. What we want, we ask our donors about life is if they get the implants or cardiac surgery or things like this. And sometimes we get information sometimes we don't have it but it doesn't matter it represents a sample of the Austrian population so well. We know about this. And yes for the restrictions.

Um yeah. That's of course a very important issue especially for the donors but it's not that easy to answer. Of course, if the body is destroyed. Severely by an accident or something like this or as we talked before by a forensic examination. We have to regret that we can't take this donor anymore. But if the accident that has, that has removed one extremity you know may happen that doesn't really influence the problem. So it's the general situation of the body.

Our major problem with this acceptance situation is the time from death to start of the embalming procedure. And this is also it's depending on the time of the year. So is the body is, if someone dies outside in the cold, is found three days after death but the body is almost frozen. There's no obligation for the anatomy. We can take this body. If somebody dies at home in the bed and near the heater, then 12 hours might be too long.

The body is already running again so that's the main problem. Um and The next question which often arises is infectious diseases. Actually, we don't see a lot of problems with infectious diseases neither, HIV, AIDs it's no problem and even COVID-19, it's not really a problem because all these viruses and infectious agents are destroyed by the embalming. The only ones we know about that is not destroyed are Prions and tuberculosis.

Umm. So we reject if you know that there is tuberculosis and we reject if if you know if there is any infection with prions.

Ourania: Again very useful. Thank you for highlighting your acceptance criteria. And once you get the donors and you look at the dissection how long are the remains allowed to be kept within anatomical institution before they're buried or cremated?

Professor Brenner: There's no regulation so actually we can Have the donor as long as we want, but in regularly we have them for about two to three years. The first year is for the embalming. The second year is for the main, that could be done like the dissection level and the final year is sometimes for minor scientific research, so we take a probe of a bone or something like this.

If it is a very interesting scientifically interesting situation of very special variation or things like this we can we will have the donor for a longer time, up to 10 years. Of course we always look for the wishes for their relatives if there are relatives and what their relatives want. So if they ask us to bury them earlier we will do this of course.

Ourania: OK. And following up slightly on the same theme about regulations how is imaging regulated in Austria when it comes to cadavers?

Professor Brenner: Well umm. Again we have no legal regulation. But it's quite simple. Each person has the right on its own images. You have the right on your images and you have to agree that your images are used. And we simply consider this right to the person and the image is also a postmortem right which extends that. And we as anatomists are the caretakers

for this in the case of the donor. He can't do anything about that. We can. So, We assume by the donation that we can use selected images or films from the cadaver for our main work; education and research. Of course, and then and then anonymising it so that nobody will know who this is in reality. But, of course there is the possibility that the donor has put up an exception therefore during their lifetime that you may not, must not use my images. And therefore although it's quite clear that students must not take photos in their dissection lab, which is which we are really strict and if we would find a student taking images from a cadaver they will be pulled out by the ears.

Ourania: And thank you again for this information. And I'm going to go back to something you mentioned the beginning of the interview just discussed a little bit more again. So what happens to a body, to a cadaver, after you have completed your anatomical examination?

Professor Brenner: So in our terminology we say that when the anatomy use is finished the body is released for burial. In most cases this means that we, the Institute, order the cremation of the body and the interment of the ashes in our honorary graveyard. But. This is exactly why we say that this release is because if relative are known they are asked if they want to take care of the burials themselves. To bury in their family cemetery or something like this. Or sometimes they want to just take part in the interment at our cemetery so they can do this also. So we have three ways we have the way we do cremation and a silent interment with nobody going with the body. Or relatives can do this funeral or their relatives take the body for a personal funeral abroad somewhere else.

Ourania: Again thank you very much and changing the topic slightly how many donations are there in average per year in the institution that you represent?

Professor Brenner: Well we have quite a lot of them. About 160 donations a year. We use about half of them for undergraduate medical education. We use about one additional third for postgraduate education and the rest, the remaining is used for science, for different projects. Quite a large number there kind of variety of areas as well.

Ourania: And a couple more questions to finish our interview. The first of these questions is which regulatory body oversees anatomical examination and what is the procedure for this, which I thought if we have kind of touched upon but again recapping it a bit more in this question.

Professor Brenner: Well actually we have no anatomy act or something like this in Austria. We have no regulation in in this case so on the one hand it is the Regional Health Directorate which is supervising the internment of human remains, so they are in some ways involved in body donation. The other thing is that there is a national law for setting up a medical institution, medical faculty, medical university and therefore even our Parliament is part of the process and I would say one of the major. regulatory parties of course The Ministry of Education which is supervising universities in general.

Ourania: And again following up a little bit on that question which I know we have discussed a little bit but again to recap on that how is licencing regulated at the level of the individual institutions?

Professor Brenner: What do you mean with licencing? The licencing to use the cadaver or?

Ourania: Yes

Professor Brenner: Yes of course the, so its the director of our department who has to decide if the cadaver can be used. sometimes inform, when this is involving research project we ask the ethics committee. We have a general exception by the ethics committee because they know we have trust informed consent and the people know that they may be used for research. But in very special cases we also asked the Ethics Committee for their vote. Because when we are not really clear about this.

Ourania: Of course of course. And the last two questions the first is on who can use the donated bodies. Again I know we have discussed briefly but to recap it again in one question.

Professor Brenner: Well it's quite simple. In principle, everybody can use a body donor who can provide legitimate interest and who willing to bear the proportionate costs. Legitimate interest means that there is the study protocol. Or there is Concept for postgraduate education things like this and of course. It must not. It need not only be a medic doctor asking for the use but it has to be reasonable for the advancement of medicine.

Ourania: Which makes sense. And the final question is can you highlight in a few words how important professional behaviour is in an anatomy room?

Professor Brenner: Umm. Let's see a little bit from the sideway. All the people who donate their body have committed themselves during lifetime. They gave informed consent in the framework of the health and declaration. But we are under this declaration working under this declaration which means we have to take care for our body donor. We have to take care for a body donor in a special way because this donor after this can't advocate himself anymore. So we have to be the advocates. And it's quite simple. We have to take care for them. We advocate for their rights and We must be grateful for the donation they have done which is a real contribution even for the later times and we must respect the will of the donor and the will was to support Medicine. Future medicine. By educating young doctors which will treat themselves and for me it is very very often a final decision in examinations for instance, if I can imagine that this person Will treat me in 10, 15 years. So, if he doesn't behave professional in the dissection in anatomy room. He won't treat me properly. And we want people professional later on so people like this should not be medical doctors. So of course behaving professionally is very important and even more important because there's nobody else on the side of the donor. If you're in the hospital you can ask someone else for a second call but our donors can't do so. We have to be very strict and have very professional handling practise.

Ourania: And on that very important note we will finish the interview. I would pick out the key message which is the respect for the donor which you very nicely highlighted Erich. So we would like to thank you for your time.

Professor Brenner: Thank you very much for the invitation.

Ourania: Of course, it has been a pleasure to learn about Austria and about the regulation so thank you very much.

Professor Brenner: Thanks to all of you.