

Australian Law Reform Commission

Submission

Body Donor Program



School of Biomedical Sciences
Department of Anatomy and Physiology

The Department of Anatomy and Physiology (**Department**) at the University of Melbourne has co-ordinated the [Body Donor Program](#) since 1882. The Department is a gazetted School of Anatomy and supports anatomical examination and the teaching and study of anatomy in Victoria. The Body Donor Program is the only program of its kind within Victoria and is well supported by the Victorian community.

Bodies that have been donated to the program are used in the valuable education and training of future healthcare professionals including medical, dental, physiotherapy, science and nursing students and for the advanced training of surgeons and other specialists. The Body Donor Program supports this education and training at University of Melbourne and other Victorian Universities and organisations which are authorised Schools of Anatomy.

All University of Melbourne enrolled students who interact with donated specimens are reminded of the privileged opportunity afforded to them by the body donor program, via formal induction processes, meeting with the Body Donor Coordinator who provides a humanistic element to their understanding of the program, and a visual presentation explaining the end-to-end process of body donation to the University.

The Department holds a student-led Annual Commemorative Thanksgiving Service attended by over 500 people, including students, staff and family members of the deceased donors. For families of the donors, the Service provides not only reassurance but a sense of closure and is used as an alternative to the traditional funeral that is inevitably compromised by the transfer of their loved one to the Department immediately after death.

The Body Donor Program maintains robust compliance and ethical procedures and protocols, which are regularly updated and strengthened. All potential body donors are required to complete and sign a [Consent Form](#), prior to their death, which also requires the signature of the nominated next of kin acknowledging they understand the nature of the donation. The Consent Form is accompanied by a [Body Donor Information Sheet](#) which ensures informed consent can be given.

The Body Donor Program currently operates within the *Human Tissue Act 1982* (Vic) (Act), *Human Tissue Regulations 2015* (Vic) (Regulations) and [Guidelines for the governance of schools of anatomy in Victoria 2014](#) published by the Victorian Department of Health (Guidelines). It is important that any reforms do not disrupt or negatively impact the continued operation of the Body Donor Program, affect current donations or affect anatomical examination, teaching and study programs across Victoria.

Reform focus

The Body Donor Program recognises the need for updates to the Victorian regulatory framework and provides the below comments.

Guidelines for the governance of Schools of Anatomy in Victoria

The Victorian Department of Health published the Guidelines in 2014 to “to clarify the responsibilities of Victorian Schools of Anatomy (SoA) under the Human Tissue Act 1982”. However:

- the legal status and intended application of the Guidelines is unclear;
- the Guidelines deal with matters the Act and Regulations are silent on; and
- the Act and the Guidelines are not consistent.

Clarity on the above should be considered as part of any reform.

Research and Development

The Body Donor Program supports clarification that the donation after death of human tissue for anatomical examination and the study and teaching of anatomy includes use in research and development. Including research and development clearly as an authorised purpose would help better align legislation with current practices, the Body Donor Program Consent Forms, donors’ wishes and medical needs, and ensure that donated bodies can be used ethically to develop treatments, medical tools, medical equipment and medical technology, understand diseases and ultimately improve healthcare.

Plastination

Plastinated specimens, and indefinite useability, allows for an extremely resourceful and impactful use of donated specimens for anatomical examination, and the teaching and study of anatomy. The Body Donor Program has plastinated specimens and these are a vital teaching resource for University of Melbourne students, students at other Victorian Universities and health care professionals. Reforms should not limit the creation or use of plastinated specimens where donor consent has been provided.

Emerging technologies

The Department of Anatomy and Physiology recognises that it is important to maintain fluidity in adapting to emerging technologies, particularly in regard to imaging, given the field of medical science is rapidly evolving. Advanced imaging techniques such as MRI, CT scans and 3D visualisation are transforming how anatomical structures are studied, taught and understood, including with donated specimens. By embracing these innovations, both education and research can be enhanced in line with technology advancements. Adaptability ensures that students and professionals stay current with cutting-edge tools and technologies, improving diagnostic skills and clinical applications.

Interstate Alignment

Providing alignment of the Human Tissue legislation across the states/territories could streamline the process for providing specimens to interstate Schools of Anatomy and reducing the need for universities to rely on overseas sources. Currently, the differences in legislation in states and territories, and often the silence on interstate jurisdiction/application, are barriers to transferring specimens interstate. A harmonised approach could remove such barriers. This would assist in strengthening local medical education and research and uphold national self-sufficiency in body donation.