



Royal College
of Surgeons
of England

ADVANCING SURGICAL CARE

Royal College of Surgeons of England Museums: Human Remains Policy

Collections: The Museums of The Royal College of Surgeons of England, including the Hunterian Collection; the College Museum; the Anatomy Collection; Pathology Collection; the Odontological Collection; the Historical Instrument Collection; the Microscope Slide Collection; the Special Collections and associated reserve collections.

Governing body: The Council of the Royal College of Surgeons of England/
The Board of Trustees of the Hunterian Collection

Date approved by Trustees of the Hunterian Collection: 9 October 2024

Date approved by Library, Museums and Archive Committee: 19 September 2024

Date approved by College Council: 5 December 2024

Date for review: September 2029

1. Museums Statement of purpose

1.1. The Royal College of Surgeons of England (RCS England) holds collections of outstanding medical, scientific, historical and cultural significance. Some Designated and Accredited by Arts Council England. The collections are held in trust for the benefit of the public in relation to its stated objectives. Its aim is to care for and use these collections to:

- 1.1.1. Enhance RCS England's reputation by raising awareness of surgeons and their work in society.
- 1.1.2. Aid the professional work of RCS England by providing training resources.
- 1.1.3. Facilitate and generate excellent medical, scientific, historical and other research.
- 1.1.4. Support public engagement with, and understanding of, surgery, its history and practice and related arts and sciences.

2. Scope of policy:

The purpose of this policy is to articulate general principles related to human remains held in RCS England Museums collections:

- 2.1. the care, management and development of the human remains collections
- 2.2. access to the Museums' collections for scientific and other purposes.

The terms human remains, human tissue and preparations, or specimens, of human tissue are used to describe the bodies or parts of bodies, of once or still living human beings (*Homo sapiens*). They include skeletal (osteological) material (whole or parts of skeletons, individual bones or fragments of bone and teeth), soft tissue including organs and skin, embryos and microscope slide preparations of human tissue (including blood). As well as material intimately associated with the body in life such as calculus.

Human remains also include any of the above that may have been modified in some way by human skill and/or physically bound-up with other non-human materials to form an artefact or artwork.

It should be read in conjunction with other RCS England Museum policies when appropriate, of particular relevance are:

- *RCS England Museum Repatriation Policy*
- *RCS England Museum Collections Development Policy*
- *RCS England Museum Research Policy*
- *RCS England Museum Loans Policy*

3. Human Remains at RCS England

Human remains have been held in the Royal College of Surgeons of England (previously the Company of Surgeons) since the 1700s. They are used to support the study and understanding of the human body. There are approximately 12,200 individual human

remains in the Museums collections today. They include remains from an archaeological context and anatomical and pathological preparations used to study the human body. RCS England recognises that historically, some human remains were obtained in circumstances that do not meet modern standards of consent and best practice. RCS England Museums aims to treat all human remains with care, respect and dignity and be mindful at all times that these were once living people.

Human remains have a unique status within museum collections. They have the potential to make a contribution to the public good, through research, teaching and, in appropriate cases, display. In many instances, they also have a personal, cultural, symbolic, spiritual or religious significance to individuals and, or, groups. This places a special responsibility on those museums that hold them. RCS England Museums recognise the responsibility that comes with caring for human remains and follows national guidance and legislation to ensure that all human remains are treated with the highest standards of care and respect.

4. Legislation and Guidance

RCS England will follow the current versions of professional guidelines, including:

- *The Department of Culture, Media and Sport Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums (2005)*
- *Museums Association Code of Ethics and additional guidance (2016)*
- *Guidance for best practice for treatment of human remains excavated from Christian burial grounds in England published by The Church of England and English Heritage (CoE/EH 2017)*

Legal frameworks will be followed, including:

- *The Human Tissue Act, 2004*
- *The Human Tissue Authority's Codes and Standards, 2017*
- *The Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act, 2003 and other legislation relevant to acquisition*

5. Acquisition

- 5.1. RCS England will acquire human material only in accordance with current UK legislation (including the Human Tissue Act 2004 or any subsequent legislation in connection with the acquisition, retention, disposal and use of human remains) or of any international legal regulation regarding the exportation and importation of human remains. In particular, anatomical and pathological preparations less than 100 years old will be acquired if they have a specific educational purpose, there is evidence of provenance and that they will be kept in accordance with the terms of the Human Tissue Act 2004.
- 5.2. RCS England will only acquire human remains when it can be demonstrated that their acquisition, and subsequent storage and use, will be within the DCMS and Human Tissue Authority codes of practice for human remains:
 - 5.2.1. Directly-donated human remains for public display from living individuals or those who died after 2006 will only be accepted with documentary evidence of informed consent (consent forms available on request from the Director of Museums and Archives).
 - 5.2.2. An institutional transfer of human remains for public display from individuals who died after 2006 will only be accepted from a suitably licensed institution with consent forms that follow the appropriate Human Tissue Authority codes of practice.

- 5.2.3. Human remains for public display less than 100 years old will only be accepted with documentation detailing the dates the remains were acquired by the donor.
- 5.2.4. Human remains for public display more than 100 years old will only be accepted with documentation detailing how long they have been in another collection or evidence of the age of the remains.

6. De-accession and Disposal

- 6.1. RCS England will not dispose of any specimen in contravention of any relevant UK legislation (including the *Human Tissue Act 2004* and any subsequent legislation in connection with the acquisition, retention, disposal and use of human remains) or of any international legal regulation regarding the exportation and importation of human remains:
 - 6.1.1. In the rare instances that human remains have deteriorated beyond use, RCS England may consider destruction according to appropriate Human Tissue Authority codes of practice.
 - 6.1.2. Unidentifiable organs and tissue may be incinerated.
 - 6.1.3. Identifiable organs and tissues may be cremated or incinerated after consultation with the crematorium's medical referee, under the *Cremation (Amendment) Regulations 2006*.
 - 6.1.4. Where known, disposal will be undertaken in consultation with relatives or recognised groups with legitimate cultural connections.

7. Requests for repatriation

Requests for the return of named individuals from close relatives will be considered sympathetically on a case-by case basis as detailed in *RCS England Museums Repatriation Policy*

8. Display

- 8.1. RCS England recognises the importance of displaying human remains in an appropriate intellectual and social context and with accompanying interpretation in all cases. Displays will be actively reviewed in line with DCMS guidelines and HTA legislation.
- 8.2. RCS England recognise that certain human remains are regarded with specific cultural sensitivity. In response to this, the display value of human remains will be considered alongside the wishes of genealogical descendants and cultural custodians where relevant
- 8.3. Public display of human remains occurs within the Hunterian Museum, and associated exhibition and learning spaces to support the study and understanding of the human body and related history.

9. Research and learning

- 9.1. Access to human remains to support medical and allied health education will be provided within the Anatomy and Pathology Museum and associated surgical training facilities.

- 9.2. Access to study human remains for academic research is provided, subject to approval, to bona fide appropriately qualified scientific academic researchers affiliated to universities, or associated institutions (also see *RCS Museums Research Policy*).
- 9.3. Access to human remains in storage is allowed only to authorised staff and visitors with specific permission under agreed supervisory arrangements.
- 9.4. Access to study human tissue less than 100 years old must also meet HTA regulations.
- 9.5. Access under defined conditions to human remains may be approved in response to a request from proven genealogical descendants or representatives of communities of origin with confirmed connections to particular human remains.
- 9.6. Access is not normally permitted outside these parameters.
- 9.7. Visitors and researchers are reminded of their ethical obligations and will be expected to follow the relevant principles of this policy, DCMS Code of Practice and HTA legislation.

10. Collections Information

- 10.1. As part of collections management RCS England maintains information on the human remains within the Museums collections.
- 10.2. RCS England is committed to broadening access to information relating to Museums collections, including human remains, and maintains a publicly accessible catalogue. All human remains over 100 years old are included in this. Information can be requested on human remains less than 100 years old and will be provided in line with the HTA legislation.

11. Images, film and digital reproduction

- 11.1. Where appropriate, human remains will be photographed, but not shown online, in print, or in publicity material, without appropriate supporting intellectual and social context.
- 11.2. Visitors are permitted to take photographs for own use within the Hunterian Museum, but are requested, out of respect, not to take close up photographs of human remains, or post images of human remains on social media or other public digital channels.
- 11.3. Any proposal for professional photography or filming of remains on display will be subject to RCS England for approval following consideration of relevant legal, regulatory, ethical and other issues.
- 11.4. Digital reproduction (including the creation of physical reproductions from the digital data), photography or filming of human remains not on display will only be approved if there is a clearly demonstrable benefit in terms of scientific enquiry, public understanding of science or the role of the Museums.
- 11.5. Images of human remains less than 100 years old can be used to support medical or scientific research and education. These cannot include images that may identify an

individual. Requests for the use of these images must be approved by the HTA Designated Individual or Person Designated.

12. Loans

- 12.1. RCS England will lend human remains to other institutions for research and display purposes when the proposed activities are in line with Museums policies and the borrowing institution meets the legal, ethical and practical requirements set out in the DCMS's Code of Practice. Requests are considered on a case-by-case basis (see *RCS England Museums Loan Policy*).
- 12.2. RCS England will also ensure that these considerations are followed when borrowing human remains from other institutions.
- 12.3. Any remains less than 100 years old will only be lent to UK institutions which are appropriately licensed to use and care for human remains by the Human Tissue Authority.
- 12.4. RCS England will require all borrowers to meet the considerations of display and image, film and digital reproduction as set out in Section 11 above

13. Collections Care

- 13.1. The Museums will care for and store human remains in conditions designed to preserve their physical integrity, in accordance with defined collections standards as stipulated in the *RCS Museums Collections Conservation and Care Policy*.
- 13.2. Staff and visitors are required to follow handling and good practice guidelines and to treat the remains with respect.
- 13.3. RCS England Museums will create and maintain records of the transport and movement of human remains using its standard collections management procedures, enabling traceability of individual items. Human remains will be packed and transported with due regard to dignity and respect.

14. Policy review procedure:

This policy will be reviewed and published from time to time, at least once every five years.