

Response to NHS consultation on retained organs, June 02

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the principal organisation representing the interests of the large and growing population of ethically concerned but non-religious people living in the UK. It exists to support and represent people who seek to live good and responsible lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. It is committed to human rights and democracy, and has a long history of active engagement in work for an open and inclusive society. The BHA's policies are informed by its members, who include eminent authorities in many fields, and by other specialists and experts who share humanist values and concerns.

Humanists generally support scientists and researchers in their quest for knowledge and the improvement of our health, and understand very well the need for medical training. Most of us would not object to our body parts and organs being retained and used for good ends. We believe that better public education about the uses of retained organs and tissue is essential, and would lead to more positive attitudes and better informed voluntary donations.

Through its function as trainer of humanist funeral officiants and provider of humanist funerals, the BHA has considerable expertise in the respectful treatment of the dead. The needs of the bereaved for a dignified and appropriate farewell must be satisfied; the respectful treatment of the body is, for most people, whatever their religious beliefs, an essential part of the mourning process. However, humanists would probably not be overly concerned about the treatment and disposal of body parts, tissue, fluids etc, as we would not consider these to be the person.

There are some questions in the document on which we have no expertise or opinion. Our response to this consultation document is therefore a selective one, concentrating on those issues of most relevance and concern to humanists, or where we have a concern for the common good.

We congratulate the authors of this document on their thorough, thoughtful and compassionate treatment of this sensitive issue.

- Q 1 We agree broadly with the principles expressed on pages 7-8.
- Q 2 A new, and less ambiguous term would be useful, though we are unsure that "human material" is the best possible one. We support the exclusion from such a definition (and from special treatment) of tissue blocks, slides, bodily fluids and other materials set out in para 19.
- Q 3 We agree. The knowledge that some good can come out of a death would be comforting to many. Relatives and families should be properly consulted, fully informed, and thanked.

Qs 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12

Humanists would favour retention and use for legitimate purposes of unidentifiable organs and tissue, and in cases where no enquiry or objection has been made by relatives.

Q 17 The utility of such material should be taken into account when determining whether to dispose of it.

Q 19 The measures described in this paper appear to be sufficient.

Qs 20 –24

Most humanists would not be overly concerned about the disposal of their body parts or those of their relatives. One funeral or memorial service soon after the death is sufficient for most of us.

Qs 26 – 28

Humanists would not object to special arrangements for disposal within the NHS, but are unlikely to require special arrangements for themselves or their relatives.

Q 29 The values expressed in para 64 seem to us ethically sound and appropriately considerate of the feelings of the living.

Qs 34 – 35

The powers and balanced composition of the HFEA would seem an appropriate model to follow. Such panels must be seen to be fair and not overly weighted towards the medical profession. We suggest that including humanist philosophers and representatives alongside the usual religious ones be seriously considered.

Q 38 Where there are no living relatives to consider, and no historic evidence of objections, material should be retained. But if there were objections, however long ago, these should be respected on the principle that we ourselves would not want our reasonable wishes to be disregarded at some time in the future.

Q 40 Most collections and displays of human material have an educational function (e.g. the recent *BodyWorlds* exhibition). We would not object to museum and other educational uses, though the use of body parts purely for entertainment would be distasteful and disrespectful, and could encourage a callous attitude that we would not wish to see.

Marilyn Mason, on behalf of the BHA, 7/6/02

(Emailed and posted, 7/6/02)