

Medical Apartheid: The Restless Dead

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**Abstract** (*Samanta C. & Yeni H.*)

In the 19th century, African descent enslaved persons were used for invasive anatomical dissection. These bodies were often obtained from graveyards through the process of illegal grave-robbing as well as burking in the hands of night doctors. This violation of respect reflected that African descendants were not free from oppression even in their deathbeds, revealing an extension of slavery beyond death. The examination of bones from African descendants was universal in the south reflecting the established racial violence against black Americans. Due to the social acceptance of disrespect towards black bodies, the postmortem display of their skeletal bones in public and private areas was very common. These bones were more often than not from non-consensual anatomical dissections obtained from cadavers that were taken in immoral manners. There was a constant violation of ethics during the 19th century. Cadavers were constantly stolen without consent from the families. Medical institutions constantly targeted Cedar Grove Cemetery to obtain bodies for anatomical dissection. In order to reduce grave robbing, the Uniform Anatomical Gift Act of 1968 and the Ghastly Act of 1867 were passed to provide unidentified bodies to medical institutions. Although grave robbing was reduced, it did not completely stop. In 2006, four men were indicted for stealing body parts from dead people in a Brooklyn funeral home in New York. They dismembered many bodies and removed tissues, bones, and ligaments. All of this was done without family consent. These men made millions of dollars by selling the body parts to medical institutions.

**Keywords:** Grave robbing, Bones, Slavery, Consent, Anatomical dissection, Black bodies

**Introduction** *(Samantha R)*

The terms, experimentation, dissection, and autopsy were confusing concepts that were performed during the 19th century. Firstly, human experimentation is utilized as a controlled and monitored induced change that reveals medical or scientific information. Secondly, dissection identifies and examines components of the body, specifically for medical education. Finally, an autopsy investigated the dissection by which physicians determined the cause and other factors of an individual's death. These concepts were highly implemented to the majority of African descent enslaved persons in research or dissection laboratories. This raised questions and concerns about where these deceased bodies were coming from. By mouth, it was known that hospitals and medical schools have been stealing black bodies undercover in darkness called night doctors for medical dissection in laboratories without consent.

**Synopsis** *(Samantha R.)*

During the 19th century, the need for cadavers for medical education and training increased. Due to this upsurge of dead bodies in medical laboratory basements, the thought of death became a fear, not because of death within itself, but their (enslaved persons) bodies taken in the care and control of whites. Dying, one of the most memorable moments in life, was now known as the most horrifying, fearing, and dreading moment for people of African descent could encounter and there was nothing that could be done about it. Anatomical dissection, in a deeper aspect, meant more than just the standard definition towards people of African descent. It demonstrated a prolonging of slavery into eternity. Even in death, they were not free due to the extremities of white control over their bodies (Washington, 2006). It was claimed that some night doctors retrieved the anatomical bodies by burking, which signifies murder, mainly through

suffocation. As time progressed, the manipulation of black bodies for anatomical dissection slowly died in the South; however, teaching anatomy using only black cadavers were still implemented in the early 20th century in several southern medical schools.

### **System of A&P Focus** (*Samata C.*)

Medical racism was exhibited through the display of African descendants' bodies, bones, and skulls, as well as in white physicians' writings that described the disrespectful use of black cadavers and their bones. Medical colleges partook in this immoral exchange regularly. In one instance it is mentioned that it was discovered that a college's basement was filled with African bodies by targeting their predominant graveyards (Washington, 2006). Purposefully, illegal cadaver robbing of cemeteries belonging to colored people and the examination of their bones, conducted without anyone's consent or intellect, were committed in the name of medical knowledge guided by racism. The casual postmortem display of skeletal black bodies, such as doctors' offices, museums, and much more public/private areas, were also quite standard due to the social and universal acceptance of disrespect towards black bodies, especially in the South. These unfortunate stolen bones can be described as souvenirs of racial violence (Washington, 2006), inflicted upon enslaved individuals.

### **Violation of Ethics** (*Deih S.*)

The Oxford Dictionary defines ethics as a set of moral principles relating to a group, field, or form of conduct (Lexico Dictionaries, 2020). Cadaver plays an important role in medical school because it provides anatomical knowledge, clinical experiment, and research. Therefore, medical schools boasted their institution based on the number of cadavers and the opportunity to acquire anatomical knowledge (Washington, 2006). However, their method of obtaining

cadavers, which were of African descent, violated ethics. The reasons being that cadavers were obtained illegally through grave robbing, executed felons, and others without the consent of the person or the family. Grave robbing occurred at African descent cemeteries such as Cedar Grove Cemetery where bodies were taken from the grave at night and transported to the school. For instance, Addie Mae Collins, African descent woman, was murdered in the 1963 bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptists Church. When workers dug her grave, her body was missing. One can infer that her body was stolen like other African descent for anatomical purposes. Acts such as the Uniform Anatomical Gift Act of 1968 were passed to provide unclaimed bodies to institutions and stop the unethical act. In general, taking bodies and using it for any purpose without the consent of the person or person's family violates ethics.

**Current examples** (*Yeni H.*)

Although stealing body parts is not as common today, in 2006 four men were indicted in New York City. Two of the men were the owner of a biomedical firm, Michael Mastromarino, and a mortician Joseph Nicelli (Smith, 2006). The men had a secret room in a Brooklyn funeral home that was equipped for surgical procedures (Mogul, 2006). They dismembered about 11,000 bodies between 2001 and 2005. They would remove bone, skin, ligaments, basically any part of the body that wasn't an organ (Smith, 2006). In order to conceal the evidence, they would stuff the body with PVC piping, aprons, and gloves (Mogul, 2006). All of these procedures were done without consent from the families, instead, they would forge consent forms and sell the tissue samples to medical facilities with false information. In order to sell the body parts to transplant facilities, they would disguise the age and cause of death in order to abide by the regulations.

They made millions of dollars by taking and selling the tissue samples without permission. The men had allegedly been operating for years and were only discovered by accident.

**Conclusion** (*Deih S.*)

Compared to the past, African descent bodies, now, do not overpopulate white bodies in anatomy laboratories. Today, new medical traditions, such as donations and proper burials/memorial services that are provided by medical schools concluding each anatomy course, has been substantially executed in regards to addressing this racial manner. Although these changes are occurring by change of attitudes towards this manner, racial disparities are still relevant (Washington, 2006). The federal Uniform Anatomical Gift Act still manages the distributions of organs and tissue donation in each state. Along with that, body donation must be done with the consent of the person or the person's family. In the 19th century, medical doctors would steal bodies and still had their medical license; however, this is not the case today. There are now laws that protect bodies from being used without consent. If performance is done without consent, then ethics are violated and punishment will be placed by the law, such as license termination. With these accommodations, it is evident that change is slowly transpiring.

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