



The Go-To Guy

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Body-donation programs are benefit to us all

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"I recently did my last will and testament," wrote a reader who wished to remain anonymous.

"I asked the lawyer about donating my body to science upon death. I was told they don't do that anymore; they just take organs and tissues, selectively. Supposedly, there's a surplus of bodies. Could this be true?"

"That's the furthest thing from the truth," said Omid B. Rahimi, director of the Willed Body Program at San Antonio's UT Health Science Center. In fact there was a shortage this year, he said.

The center has accepted donated bodies for as long as it's been a teaching facility, "so 30 years plus," Rahimi said. The school needs about 180 bodies annually for its medical, dental and health-professional students and for physicians who are updating their skills. The value of the bodies to science is immense, he said. "Each cadaver affects thousands of patients."

The state's 10 body-donation programs are regulated by the Anatomical Board, which ensures that "only authorized educational and medical institutions receive human remains and that the remains are treated with dignity and respect," according to its website.

The health science center doesn't pay for body donations – nor does any program in the United States – but it does cover the cost of transporting and embalming bodies donated within 100 miles of the school.

Donor names are not revealed to students, and when the bodies are no longer needed for research they're cremated by program personnel. Families who wish to keep the donor's ashes pay a small fee; ashes not returned are buried in the health science center's cemetery in an annual ceremony attended by students, faculty and administrators.

For information and to download the form authorizing your donation, go online to the health science center's Department of Cellular and Structural Biology, uthscsa.edu/csb, and click the "Willed Body Program" link. Or call the office, 210-567-3900, and ask for Linda Baker-Webber.

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