

A body's life after death

Local funeral home director lobbies for 'body broker' rules

CATHY DYSON

The Free Lance-Star

As a funeral home director, Jon Milton is used to dealing with death, but the issue he recently discussed with legislators on Capitol Hill delves into the realm of horror movies.

Milton and about 200 other

members of the National Funeral Directors Association painted macabre images of "body brokers," individuals or companies that target those who may want to donate their loved one's body to science or may not be able to afford funeral expenses.

The next-of-kin signs over rights to the body, believing the donation will help others. Instead, they may unwittingly be contributing to a money-making industry in which brokers trade bodies "as raw material in

a largely unregulated national market," according to the NFDA.

Or, as Milton, the manager of Laurel Hill Funeral Home and Memorial Park in Spotsylvania County put it, body brokers are "selling what should have been for medical research to the highest bidder."

A broker can get up to \$10,000 or more for a body, according to the NFDA. Bodies can be sold or leased more than once, and Milton said brokers "typically will make the most money" by sell-

ing off six separate pieces: head, arms, legs and torso.

"As a result, it can be difficult to track what becomes of donors' bodies or body parts, ensure they are handled with dignity and returned to their loved ones after cremation," according to the NFDA.

Grisly practices

A 2017 investigation by Reuters news agency called "The Body

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Bodies

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Trade” brought to light many of the grisly practices of body brokers. A reporter contacted a Tennessee brokerage firm and, after a few emails, procured a cervical spine and two human heads, according to the Reuters story.

The cost was \$300 per item, plus shipping.

Other news outlets occasionally report on equally bizarre incidents, from people buying parts online and reselling them on Facebook to a November 2021 incident in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that seems particularly disturbing, even in the context of body brokers.

A World War II veteran wanted to donate his body to science “as an act of patriotism,” according to a story in The Advocate. His widow carried out his wishes, only to discover that his body was used during a public autopsy at an event known as the Oddities and Curiosities Expo.

A touring group in Portland, Oregon, charged up to \$500 per ticket for people to watch the public dissection, advertising “there will be several opportunities to get an up close and personal look at the cadaver,” according to The Advocate story.

Brokers deal with whole-body donations because, as the NFDA reports, it’s legal in almost every state for anyone to sell the human remains of adults. Virginia may be one of the few states that has a law on the books. It’s a Class 1 misdemeanor to be involved in the trafficking of human dead bodies, according to state code.

Virginia also is one of the few states that requires authorization to have “any anatomical material imported into the state,” said Rick Sikon, operational director of the Virginia State Anatomical Program. Shipments must be tracked through the Virginia Department of Health.

Sikon said he knows body brokers are out there, but “because of the ways laws are written, they can’t operate in Virginia.”

Then, he amended his statement to say: “They can’t operate legally.”

‘Wrong and immoral’

The funeral home directors point out that donations of organs and other tissues such as skin, eyes and bones are handled in a hospital setting under practices that are heavily regulated by the federal government.

No such regulations exist with donations of whole bodies, and that’s what Milton and others are asking Congress to consider. They believe a federal agency should register, track and regulate the work of facilities that receive donated bodies for education and research to make sure those who handle the deceased are trained, licensed and use the proper tools.

“From what I learned,” said Milton, who started researching the issue four years ago, “I could literally (work) in my garage with a cooler and be a body broker.”

When people first hear about the issue, as some members of Congress or their legislative staffs did last month, they often have the same reaction, said Lesley Witter, a lobbyist with the NFDA.

“People think there’s no way that’s happening in America,” she said. “This is 2023 and we don’t allow those things to happen.”

Rep. Abigail Spanberger said in a statement that “no Virginia family should have to go through such heartbreak after losing a loved one.” She said she supports stronger measures to crack down on body brokers and prevent the trafficking of human remains.

Sen. Mark Warner said “the horrific process of body brokering is wrong and immoral. It’s paramount that the wishes of the deceased are respected.”

Both said they will review

DONATING IN VIRGINIA

The Virginia State Anatomical Program is the only agency in the state authorized to receive donations of human dead bodies for education or research. It provides bodies to 30 medical schools and teaching facilities across the state.

There’s more demand for “donors” than there are people willing to donate, according to the VSAP’s website at vdh.virginia.gov/medical-examiner/vsap/. It cites the value of donating a body to science as “one special gift that will make a significant and lasting contribution.”

There are conditions that come with that gift, and donors as well as their next-of-kin need to know that ahead of time. Registration is encouraged by filling out forms online or calling the VSAP office, which is part of the Virginia Department of Health, at 804/786-2479, to get the forms.

Upon a donor’s death, the body must be refrigerated within four hours. Families will need to get the body to a funeral home if the person dies at home; at a hospital, that will be taken care of. Next-of-kin has to pay for refrigeration and transport, but the cost of cremation will be covered by the VSAP.

VSAP officials will review the person’s medical records and determine if the body can be accepted. Bodies are considered unacceptable if people are severely obese; have contagious diseases; if there’s been a violent death or suicide; or if organs have been removed. Other details are spelled out online.

Medical schools and teaching facilities outside Virginia have their own requirements, and those interested in donating bodies should contact them for more information. The Anatomical Board of the State of Florida has a state-by-state list of programs on its website at anatbd.acb.med.ufl.edu/usprograms/.

—Cathy Dyson

the NFDA’s recommendation, the Consensual Donation and Research Integrity Act of 2023, when it is introduced on the Hill.

‘Noble and selfless’

As for the prevalence of body brokers in the Fredericksburg area, that’s difficult to gauge for the same reason Witter mentioned: there’s no tracking or regulation.

Milton has learned from funeral directors in other states that people in his own profession sometimes partner with body brokers by placing pamphlets in their lobbies, aimed at those who perhaps can’t afford the cost of a funeral or want to donate to science.

Milton said he hasn’t seen any such pamphlets at local funeral homes — and he’s looked. But then, in the last month alone, Milton has scheduled memorial services for three families who donated their loved ones’ bodies to science.

“It is a noble and selfless act,” he said, hoping the bodies went to legitimate sources, “but my heart breaks understanding what is most likely taking place.”

Ernie Johnson, owner of Johnson Funeral Home in Locust Grove, said he doesn’t know if body brokers are looking for business locally.

“I have no idea if it’s taking place,” he said. “But it would not surprise me in today’s world.”

Read the fine print

How does a family respect the wishes of a loved one who wants to contribute to science or medical research? How can people know if they’re dealing with reputable representatives or body brokers?

In many cases, universities and state-run anatomy programs aren’t allowed to solicit donations of bodies; people have to come to them, according to the NFDA. There’s a vital need

for donated bodies, according to those interviewed, in medical studies, for surgeons learning new techniques or forensic students tracking the way bodies decompose under certain conditions.

“No models, films or books can substitute for the actual study of the human body itself,” according to the Virginia State Anatomical Program website. “Hundreds of doctors, nurses and other health professionals studying in Virginia medical schools, colleges and universities must learn how the human body is constructed before they can successfully treat living patients.”

The VSAP is the only agency in Virginia authorized to receive donations of human bodies for scientific studies. It provides “donors,” which is how the program refers to donated bodies, to six Virginia medical schools, 17 colleges and universities, five community colleges, and two biomechanical research facilities, according to its website.

Even before COVID-19 changed practically every aspect of health care, the VSAP didn’t have “enough donors to meet the needs,” said Sikon, the director. It couldn’t accept bodies of those who died of COVID, for fear of contaminating researchers, and that’s impacted donations which had numbered about 450 bodies a year, he said.

For many students in health care fields — including those learning the mortuary trade as Milton did — a donated body often is the person’s “first patient,” Sikon said. In those settings, he said bodies are treated with respect and dignity, and he described moving memorial services, held at universities and medical schools, to honor those who donated their own bodies or their loved ones’ bodies to research.

The Virginia program takes in whole bodies only,



PROVIDED BY JON MILTON

Jon Milton, a funeral director in Spotsylvania County, recently joined others in his profession for a summit on Capitol Hill to ask legislators to support a bill that provides oversight and regulation in the handling of dead human bodies.

Sikon said. It doesn’t buy bodies from other places or get paid for what it provides to teaching facilities, except for a fee to cover operational expenses to get and prepare the bodies. That cost averages about \$2,300 per body, he said.

However, there are times when researchers need specific parts, such as knees or shoulders for surgeons being trained on joint replacements. Nobody wants to waste a donation and use only one piece, so there may be times when “segmented” parts are sent to various places, Sikon said.

In those cases, next-of-kin have to give their permission for that type of usage, Sikon said.

He offered the same advice as Milton and others in the funeral business: Look into the donation, well ahead of time if possible, and know what you’re signing. Read the fine print, which should indicate if the donation will stay whole or be segmented.

Ask about possible uses and don’t authorize unwanted ones, Milton said.

“That’s really what it comes down to, being informed and doing a little research and understanding what is going to take place,” Sikon said, adding his agency stresses transparency with potential donors and their families. “They appreciate that and it leaves nothing to the imagination.”

Cathy Dyson: 540/374-5425
cdyson@freelancestar.com

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