

SCIENCE MUSEUM GROUP

**SCIENCE MUSEUM GROUP
HUMAN REMAINS POLICY
OCTOBER 2018**

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GOVERNING BODY: BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE SCIENCE MUSEUM

DATE FOR APPROVAL: 2018

DATE FOR REVIEW: 2024

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The National Heritage Act 1983 requires the Science Museum Group (SMG) to: care for, preserve and add to the objects in the collection, exhibit them to the public and make them available for study and research; and to promote the public's enjoyment and understanding of science and technology, and of the development of those subjects.
- 1.2 SMG museums share a mission to inspire futures by:
 - Creative exploration of science, technical innovation and industry, and how they made and sustain modern society;
 - Building a scientifically literate society, using the history, present and future of science, technology, medicine, transport and media to grow science capital;
 - Inspiring the next generations of scientists, inventors and engineers.
- 1.3 This policy supports the SMG strategic priority to sustain and grow our world-class collection and sets out the principles by which the SMG (the Science Museum, London, the Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester, the National Railway Museum, York and Shildon, and the National Science and Media Museum, Bradford) will make decisions about the management and display of the human remains.
- 1.4 Human remains have unique status within museum collections and must be treated with the highest standards of care and respect. SMG recognises the value of human remains - they can advance research and public understanding of cultural and medical practices, biological processes, genetics, diet, disease and population movements over time. For these reasons, human remains will continue to be held in SMG collections.
- 1.5 Whilst there is widespread popular and scientific support for the holding of human remains in museums, it is recognised that historically, some human remains were obtained in circumstances that may not meet current best practice. At the same time, SMG recognises that certain human remains are now regarded with specific cultural sensitivity. In response to this, the research and display value of human remains will be considered alongside the wishes of genealogical descendants and cultural custodians where relevant. :
- 1.6 SMG holds approximately 900 human remains from many different countries and historical periods. Approximately 500 of the human remains in SMG care are part of Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection, which has been on loan to the SMG from the Wellcome Trust since the late 1970s. The management of these remains will be considered in conjunction with Wellcome Collection, the Trust's museum and library, and its corresponding [Care of Human Remains Policy](#).

2. GUIDANCE AND LEGISLATION

- 2.1 SMG 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 \(2016\)](#) and [the Archives and Records Association \(UK and Ireland\) Code of Ethics \(2018\)](#)
 - [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)
- 2.2 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

3. HUMAN REMAINS DEFINITION

- 3.1 SMG follows the DCMS definition of human remains which are the bodies, and parts of bodies, of once living people from the species Homo sapiens. This includes osteological material (whole or part skeletons, individual bones or fragments of bone and teeth), soft tissue including organs and skin, embryos and slide preparations of human tissue.
- 3.2 SMG also follows the Human Tissue Act 2004 definition of "[relevant material](#)" under the Act.

- 3.3 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.

4. COLLECTIONS INVENTORY

- 4.1 SMG holds human remains and will continue to compile and maintain a published inventory in accordance with DCMS guidance.
- 4.2 Information about human remains in Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection may also be held and published by the Wellcome Collection.

5. CONSULTATION AND DECISION-MAKING

- 5.1 SMG is committed to decision-making on human remains informed by representatives of source communities, genealogical descendants, scientific, academic and archaeological communities, SMG staff, audiences and stakeholders. These groups and members of them will be considered as 'appropriate communities' and 'interested parties' for the purposes of consultation on human remains, on a case-by-case basis.
- 5.2 The SMG Collections Group will make recommendations to the SMG Collections & Research Committee and the SMG Board of Trustees based on ethical judgment, professional best practice, cultural views on what constitutes respectful treatment, measurable benefits to SMG and its audiences and the needs of different communities.
- 5.3 If the human remains are part of Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection, decision-making will be made with the Wellcome Collection's input and consultation.

6. ACQUISITIONS

- 6.1 SMG will acquire human remains responsibly and ethically when they are of potential value to our mission.
- 6.2 SMG will not acquire material where there is any suspicion of illicit trade, and will only acquire material post-dating 2004 where valid written consent for storage and public display has been granted by the deceased. In the case of historical remains, every effort will be made to ensure that provenance has been established as clearly as possible.
- 6.3 Any proposal for the acquisition of human remains less than 100 years old will be subject to the legislation set out in the Human Tissue Act 2004 and guidance from the Human Tissue Authority.

7. DE-ACCESSIONS

- 7.1 Under the provisions of the National Heritage Act 1983 and the Human Tissue Act 2004, SMG is amongst those institutions granted the power to de-accession human remains.
- 7.2 SMG may de-accession human remains to transfer them to another collection with an appropriate human remains policy where they will be more productively utilised.
- 7.3 Before de-accessioning human remains, SMG will establish whether genealogical or cultural communities wish to make a claim for the return or burial of the remains.
- 7.4 De-accessions will be subject to final approval by SMG Board of Trustees

8. REQUESTS FOR REPATRIATION

- 8.1 SMG is committed to openness and transparency regarding claims for the repatriation of human remains. Claims will be determined on a case-by-case basis following dialogue and consultation with claimants, potential claimants and stakeholders in accordance with DCMS guidance.
- 8.2 SMG will:
- Treat all requests sensitively
 - Discuss requests for the repatriation of human remains with contemporary indigenous originating communities and stakeholder groups
 - Evaluate cases with rigour and respect for communities
- 8.3 Requests for the repatriation of remains from Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection should be submitted in writing to the Director of Wellcome Collection. SMG and Wellcome Collection will work together to manage any claims and their outcome.
- 8.4 SMG may seek external expertise when considering requests.

- 8.5. Human remains that are the subject of a pending claim will not normally be made available for display, loan or research, though requests may be considered in exceptional cases. No destructive analysis that is contrary to the cultural sensitivities of indigenous originating communities will be carried out. Research into the provenance of remains may be permissible but this will be considered on a case-by-case basis.
- 8.6. SMG follows the model claim procedure in the DCMS Guidance and will use the DCMS criteria for evaluating repatriation claims in coming to a decision.
- 8.7. Claims for repatriation will be subject to the final approval by the SMG Board of Trustees

9. DOCUMENTATION

- 9.1. SMG is committed to broadening access to information relating to our holdings of human remains by maintaining a publicly accessible inventory and improving information on our human remains.
- 9.2. SMG holds the principal documentation on human remains in Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection, but further provenance information may also be available in the [Library at Wellcome Collection](#).

10. STORAGE AND CONSERVATION

- 10.1. All SMG human remains will be stored professionally and respectfully in an actively managed and monitored environment, whether on loan or part of the permanent collection, in line with DCMS guidance and good museum practice.
- 10.2. Human remains will be stored separately from other items in the collection.
- 10.3. Where human remains require conservation, the principle of minimum intervention and reversibility will always be applied.
- 10.4. The request of any member of staff not to participate in any work directly involving the handling of human remains will be respected.

11. DISPLAY

- 11.1. There are high levels of public interest, and strong educational value in the display of human remains. Visitor surveys show that the vast majority of museum visitors are comfortable with, and often expect to see, human remains as an element of museum displays.
- 11.2. SMG recognises the importance of exhibiting human remains in an appropriate intellectual and social context and accompanying interpretation in all cases. Displays will be actively reviewed in line with DCMS guidelines and HTA legislation.
- 11.3. SMG will create suitable ways to warn visitors who may not wish to view human remains, and lists galleries that display remains on the museum's websites.
- 11.4. The display of non-European remains will be considered on a case-by-case basis. In the case of many indigenous communities, display of such remains in the context of a British museum may be considered inappropriate or offensive. Where there are known to be cultural objections to the display of specific human remains, or images of these remains, SMG emphasis will be on respecting this sensitivity.

12. LOANS

- 12.1. SMG will lend human remains to other institutions for research and display purposes when the proposed activities are in line with our policies and the borrowing institution meets the legal, ethical and practical requirements set out in the DCMS's Code of Practice.
- 12.2. SMG 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 licensed for the display of human remains by the Human Tissue Authority.
- 12.4. SMG will require all borrowers to meet the considerations of display as set out in Section 11.

¹The Department of Culture, Media and Sport Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums (2005) Part 3: Claims for return, 3.3, p25-30.

²The Department of Culture, Media and Sport Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums (2005) Part 3: Claims for return, 3.3.2 Evidence gathering, p26-29.

13. TRANSPORT

- 13.1. SMG will create and maintain records of the transport of human remains using its standard collections management procedures, enabling traceability of individual items.
- 13.2. Human remains will be packed and transported with due regard to dignity and respect.
- 13.3. The arrangements for packing and transport of human remains will be based on a case-by-case assessment of the condition of the material and risks arising from transport.

14. ACCESS, RESEARCH AND LEARNING

- 14.1. SMG will provide access to human remains as part of its collaborative practice through research, public history, learning and engagement, and in line with the SMG Collections Information and Access Policy.
- 14.2. Access to human remains in storage is allowed only to authorised staff and visitors with specific permission under agreed supervisory arrangements.
- 14.3. Visitors and researchers are reminded of their ethical obligations and will be expected to follow the relevant principles of this policy and the DCMS Code of Practice.
- 14.4. Requests for the study of human remains, particularly those identified as sensitive, or requests involving innovative procedures or sampling, will be considered on a case by case basis.
- 14.5. Human remains can have greater impact in learning compared to models or other media, provided due regard is given to sensitivities and care.
- 14.6. Members of the public, including teachers and students, will be forewarned of any human remains being included in a session. Participants in the session will be told what is meant by dignified and respectful treatment of human remains.
- 14.7. SMG is the main point of contact for access, research and learning enquires for human remains in Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection. However, SMG will consult with Wellcome Collection when a request relates to destructive sampling, which will require an ethical review and approval from the Director of Wellcome Collection.

15. IMAGES AND FILMING

- 15.1. Where appropriate and in line with SMG public engagement goals, human remains will be photographed, but not shown online, in print, or in publicity material, without appropriate supporting intellectual and social context.
- 15.2. Photography or filming of human remains that are not on display will be permitted where there is a clearly demonstrable benefit in terms of scientific enquiry, public understanding of science, or public understanding of the role of the Museum. Any proposal for photography or filming of remains will be subject to SMG approval following consideration of relevant legal, regulatory, ethical and other issues.
- 15.3. Where there are known to be cultural objections to the photography or filming of specific human remains, SMG emphasis will be on respecting this sensitivity.
- 15.4. It should be assumed that human remains placed on public display will be photographed by visitors. Staff will be mindful of this when generating new displays and creating and using images of human remains. In certain circumstances visitors may be requested not to photograph human remains.

16. POLICY AUTHORISATION, REVIEW AND CONTACTS

- 16.1. Authorised by Board of Trustees of the Science Museum, October 2018 and December 2023
Review date: December 2024
- 16.2. SMG'S principal contact for Human Remains, and the Designated Individual under the Human Tissue Act 2004, is:

Jack Kirby, Associate Director of Collections Services
CollectionsServices@ScienceMuseum.ac.uk

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This policy draws upon best practice in the published policies of other UK museums holding human remains, including the Wellcome Trust as the major lender of human remains to the Science Museum Group.