

SCIENCE MUSEUM GROUP

SCIENCE MUSEUM GROUP HUMAN REMAINS POLICY 2024

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GOVERNING BODY: BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE SCIENCE MUSEUM

DATE: DECEMBER 2024

DATE FOR REVIEW: DECEMBER 2029

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The National Heritage Act 1983 requires the Science Museum Group 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 promote the public's enjoyment and understanding of science and technology, and of the development of those subjects.
- 1.2 Our mission to inspire futures acts as our 'North Star' for the creative exploration of science, for building science literacy through a science capital approach, and for inspiring the next generations of scientists, inventors and engineers.
- 1.3 This policy supports the Science Museum Group strategic priority to sustain and enhance our collection and sets out the principles by which the Group (comprising the [Science Museum](#) in London, the [National Railway Museum](#) in York, [Locomotion](#) in Shildon, the [National Science and Media Museum](#) in Bradford, the [Science and Industry Museum](#) in Manchester and the [Science and Innovation Park](#) in Wiltshire) will make decisions about the management, care, research and display of human remains.
- 1.4 Human remains have unique status within museum collections and must be treated with the highest standards of care and respect. The Group 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 Science Museum Group collections.
- 1.5 Although there is 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, the Group recognises that certain human remains are regarded with significant cultural sensitivity. The research and display value of these human remains will be carefully balanced with the wishes of known genealogical descendants and cultural custodians as appropriate to the circumstances.
- 1.6 The Science Museum Group holds over 4,300 human remains from many different countries and historical periods. They include skeletal material, mummies, artefacts incorporating remains and slides containing human tissues. The largest group of human remains is 2,816 sets of gallstones. Approximately 1,000 of the human remains in the Group's care are part of Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection, which has been on loan to the Science Museum Group from the Wellcome Trust since the late 1970s. The management of these remains will be considered in conjunction with Wellcome Collection, the Wellcome Trust's museum and library, and its corresponding policy on the care of human remains (currently [Care of Human Remains Policy](#)).

2. GUIDANCE AND LEGISLATION

- 2.1 The Science Museum Group will follow the current versions of professional guidelines, including:
 - Department for Culture, Media and Sport '[Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums](#)', 2005
 - Museums Association '[Code of Ethics](#)' and '[Additional Guidance](#)', 2016, and Archives & Records Association (UK & Ireland) '[ARA Code of Ethics](#)', 2024
 - International Council of Museums '[ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums](#)', 2017
- 2.2 Legal and other ethical frameworks will be followed, including:
 - [Human Tissue Act 2004](#)
 - [The Human Tissue Authority's codes and standards](#), 2023
 - [Dealing in Cultural Objects \(Offences\) Act 2003](#) and other legislation relevant to acquisition
 - [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), 2018

3. HUMAN REMAINS DEFINITION

- 3.1 The Science Museum Group follows the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (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. The Group will also manage hair and nails, regardless of origin, as human remains.
- 3.2 The Group 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 The Science Museum Group 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 by Wellcome Collection.

5. CONSULTATION AND DECISION-MAKING

- 5.1 The Science Museum Group is committed to decision-making on human remains informed by representatives of source communities; genealogical descendants; scientific, academic and archaeological communities; and the Group's 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 Our Collections Group will make recommendations to the Science Museum Group Collections and Research Committee and Board of Trustees, based on ethical judgment, professional best practice and cultural views on what constitutes respectful treatment, measurable benefits to the Group and its audiences, and the needs of different communities.
- 5.3 If the human remains are part of Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection, then Wellcome Collection will make decisions in consultation with the Science Museum Group.

6. ACQUISITIONS

- 6.1 The Science Museum Group will acquire human remains responsibly and ethically when they are of potential value to our mission.
- 6.2 The Group will not acquire human remains where there is any suspicion of illicit trade, and will only acquire human remains postdating 2004 where valid written consent for storage and public display has been granted by the deceased. In the case of historical remains, due diligence will be undertaken 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 (HTA).

7. DEACCESSIONS

- 7.1 Under the provisions of the National Heritage Act 1983 and the Human Tissue Act 2004, the Science Museum Group is among those institutions granted the power to deaccession human remains.
- 7.2 The Group may deaccession human remains to transfer them to another collection with an appropriate human remains policy where they will be more productively utilised.
- 7.3 Before deaccessioning human remains, the Group will establish whether genealogical or source communities wish to make a claim for the return or burial of the remains.
- 7.4 Deaccessions will be subject to final approval by the Group's Board of Trustees.
- 7.5 This section does not apply to human remains that are part of Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection, where decisions about deaccessioning will be made by Wellcome Collection in consultation with the Science Museum Group.

8. REQUESTS FOR REPATRIATION

- 8.1 The Science Museum Group 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 internal and external stakeholders in accordance with DCMS guidance.
- 8.2 The Group will:
- Treat all requests sensitively
 - Where requests for the repatriation of human remains are associated with contemporary originating communities, discuss the requests with appropriate 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. Wellcome Collection will make decisions and consult with the Science Museum Group to manage any claims and their outcome.
- 8.4 The Group 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. Research into and analysis of the provenance of remains may be permissible, but this will be considered on a case-by-case basis and take into account cultural sensitivities.
- 8.6 The Science Museum Group follows the model claim procedure in the DCMS guidance¹ and will use the DCMS criteria for evaluating repatriation claims in coming to a decision.²
- 8.7 Claims for repatriation of human remains from the Science Museum Group Collection will be subject to final approval by the Group's Board of Trustees.

9. DOCUMENTATION

- 9.1 The Science Museum Group 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 The Group holds the principal documentation on human remains in Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection, but further provenance information may also be available in the [Wellcome Historical Medical Museum and Library collection](#).

10. STORAGE, CARE AND CONSERVATION

- 10.1 All 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 All human remains, including those modified or forming part of an artefact or artwork, will be stored separately from other items in the collection.
- 10.3 Where there are known culturally sensitive protocols, procedures and best practices, these will be observed as relevant and appropriate to the circumstances.
- 10.4 Preventive measures will be used to care for the collection. Where human remains require conservation, the principle of minimum intervention and reversibility will be applied as appropriate to the circumstances.
- 10.5 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 is a high level 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 The Science Museum Group recognises the importance of exhibiting human remains in an appropriate intellectual and social context with accompanying interpretation in all cases. Displays will be actively reviewed in line with DCMS guidelines and HTA legislation.
- 11.3 The Group will create suitable ways to warn visitors who may not wish to view human remains, and also list galleries that display remains on the museums' websites.
- 11.4 The display of remains from indigenous communities will be considered on a case-by-case basis. In the case of many 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, the Group's emphasis will be on respecting this sensitivity.

12. LOANS

- 12.1 The Science Museum Group 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 DCMS's code of practice.
- 12.2 The Group 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 HTA.
- 12.4 The Group will require all borrowers to meet the considerations of display as set out in Section 11.

¹ 'Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums', Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2005, pp25–30

² Ibid, pp26–9

13. TRANSPORT

- 13.1 The Science Museum Group 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 their condition and risks arising from transport.

14. ACCESS, RESEARCH AND LEARNING

- 14.1 The Science Museum Group will provide access to human remains as part of its collaborative practice through research, public history, learning and engagement, and in line with the Group's 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. Access to sensitive human remains will take place in a private and respectful space.
- 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. Access will be provided with respect for the known cultural practices of relevant communities as appropriate to the circumstances.
- 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 under the Group's procedures for access to the collection and sampling for research.
- 14.5 Human remains can have greater impact in learning than models or other media, provided due regard is given to sensitivities and care. 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.
- 14.6 The Science Museum Group is the main point of contact for access, research and learning enquiries for human remains in Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection. However, Wellcome Collection will make decisions on destructive sampling in consultation with the Science Museum Group.

15. IMAGES AND FILMING

- 15.1 Where appropriate, and in line with Science Museum Group 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 the Group's 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, the Group's 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 the Board of Trustees of the Science Museum, December 2024
Review date: December 2029
- 16.2 The Science Museum Group'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

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This policy draws on 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.