

January 8, 2018

To the judges:

Reuters spent more than a year examining the workings of a multimillion-dollar industry that dissects, rents and sells the donated dead. [As part of our exploration of the industry](#), our editors and reporters faced a number of ethical challenges, including whether to purchase human body parts and how to go about it.

The firms that deal in the donated dead are sometimes called body brokers, but they prefer to be known as non-transplant tissue banks. They acquire, usually for free, bodies that have been donated to science. Then they often cut those bodies into pieces and sell the parts for hundreds or thousands of dollars each. The buyers are typically medical researchers, device makers and groups that train doctors.

As part of our examination, reporters Brian Grow and John Shiffman, and editors Blake Morrison and Michael Williams, sought to determine how body parts were handled by these companies, especially given the dearth of regulations governing the industry.

We wanted to know whether or to what extent body brokers would vet possible buyers. And we wanted to assess the condition of any specimens that might be sold to us. That way, we could learn whether those donated body parts truly were suitable for further medical research.

To purchase human body parts, Reuters stayed true to its own policies and principles: We would never misrepresent ourselves. Reporter Brian Grow sent queries to body brokers from his work email account. He used his name and the name of his employer, Thomson Reuters. Although he did not volunteer that he was a journalist, he would have identified himself as a reporter had he been asked. Moreover, a simple Google search for Brian Grow and Reuters would have identified his work as a reporter.

To help determine if brokers would try to verify the buyer or his bona fides, Brian supplied them with an address that is a “virtual office,” a location that Reuters rented for \$101 a month. The virtual office came with a receptionist and a conference room. It was on the 19th floor of an office building in Minneapolis. Again, a simple Google search of the address shows that it is advertised as virtual office space.

Brian sent queries for body parts to five brokers. Two did not respond. Two asked for more information about the purpose of the purchase. One broker, James Byrd of Restore Life USA in Elizabethton, Tennessee, offered to sell a cervical spine and sent X-ray samples. Reuters purchased the cervical spine from Restore Life, and later bought two human heads from the same firm.

As we contemplated this purchase, we also set up an apparatus to ensure that we treated with great care whatever body parts we might acquire. To handle the cervical spine and two heads safely, legally and ethically, the news agency enlisted the guidance and assistance of one of America’s foremost experts on body donation: Angela McArthur, who directs the anatomy bequest program at the University of Minnesota. She volunteered her time and was never paid by the news agency to work with us.

To comply with Minnesota law, the initial email query included the name and address of a local crematory where final disposition of the remains would be done. The body parts sold to Reuters were never handled by journalists. Brian Grow did accept the packed boxes as they arrived at the virtual office but then handed

them to a licensed mortician, who transported the body parts to the university lab for examination and storage.

Under Tennessee and Minnesota law, the sales and purchases were legal. Although laws expressly prohibit the sale of body parts transplanted from a dead person into a living one, most states are silent on the sale of body parts for research or education.

The documents accompanying the specimens Byrd sent to Reuters did not identify the donors but did list their dates of death. By reviewing obituaries from those dates and that geographic area, Reuters tentatively identified one of the donors as Cody Saunders of Townsend, Tennessee. Byrd sold Reuters the man's cervical spine.

Learning the donor's identity presented another ethical dilemma: As we learned more about the life of Saunders, we decided to tell his extraordinary story of perseverance -- and the difficult choice his parents made when they donated his body.

For other stories in the series, we had asked reporter Brian Grow to speak with family members who donated the bodies of their relatives to other body brokers. Many had no idea what became of their loved ones, and Brian was often left with the difficult and heart-wrenching task of talking with them about what we had learned.

He understood quickly that such talks were likely to reopen old wounds -- and, if handled poorly, could create new ones. As we discussed ways to handle those interactions, Brian set aside the instincts as an intrepid reporter and relied instead on his own ethical compass, showing the families his respect for their loss and his understanding of the difficult choices many of them made. Brian explained his approach this way: "Speak calmly. Give hugs. Shake hands. Make eye contact. Say thank you. And ask the families to tell us about the happy times they shared with their relatives."

When we asked Brian to approach the family of Cody Saunders, the 24-year-old whose cervical spine was sold to Reuters for \$300, the challenge was even greater. Cody, we learned through reporting, had led a difficult life. And like many of those whose bodies were donated to the brokers we had identified, his family was too poor to pay for a traditional burial. Internally, we spent hours discussing how to best approach the family. What we came to realize was that Brian already knew precisely what to do.

"I spoke to my wife for hours about how I planned to handle the situation," Brian said. "As a father to three young girls, I thought about how I would feel, react -- and want to be treated -- if a journalist were to raise questions about my own decision to donate my child's body. To me, it requires easing into the conversation, understanding their emotional state, and asking questions that naturally flow from their responses."

As Brian met with the Saunders at their motorhome in Tennessee, he realized that the raw emotion they felt over the loss of their son hadn't diminished over the past year. He said he let their raw emotion inform his approach. "It has never been so important to ease into the conversation, take one step and a time," Brian said. He understood that he needed to explain the murkiness of the industry and also why Reuters had gone about purchasing body parts. He also needed to reassure the Saunders that, with us, their son was in good hands, and that we would get his ashes back to them.

Late last year, Brian returned to visit Richard and Angie Saunders to keep our word to them. As promised, and at Reuters' expense, we had cremated Cody's spine, and Brian traveled to Tennessee to delivered the

ashes to the Saunders home. As with every meeting Brian had with the family, it ended with hugs and thank yous.

For the ethical difficulties inherent in our series, and for the manner in which Reuters and reporter Brian Grow handled these challenges, please consider The Body Trade for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Regards,  
Michael J. Williams  
Reuters Global Enterprise Editor