The Gift of a Human Body

Pacific Northwest University of Health Sciences relies heavily on the use of human bodies in the education of osteopathic physicians and other health care professionals. First-year medical students and other health care students complete or participate in the thorough dissection of the human body; and residents, board-certified physicians, and other practicing health care professionals routinely include dissection in their continued medical education. The human body, thus, represents a valuable, irreplaceable resource in the training of physicians and other health care professionals.

The bodies that the University uses in its educational programs have been given as gifts for the primary purpose of education. For example, individuals, as they put their affairs in order, may decide to donate their bodies to medical science upon their death. This generous bequest is made in writing using a standard form (see Form 1: Gift of Body). In this case, the donor should inform the next-of-kin or executor of his/her wishes to donate his/her body, and a local funeral director should be informed so that at the time of death arrangements may be made to expeditiously embalm the body in the manner required for this donation and transfer it to the University. The immediate next-of-kin also may donate the body of a person for whom they are responsible. The order of qualifying kinship is shown in the accompanying Form 2, “Gift of Body by Next-of-Kin.” For any gift of a body, prompt, special embalming and delivery is essential; thus, memorial services should be conducted without the body present. However, the University will defer to the wishes of the donor’s family.

The University requests that the estate or next-of-kin of the deceased pay for embalming and transportation of the body to the University. However, the University will pay reasonable embalming and transportation costs if such costs would be a financial burden to the family. The responsibility for costs of embalming and transportation should be arranged prior to the gift of body.

The University reserves the right to refuse gift bodies, and the donor or next-of-kin should consider alternatives should PNWU not accept the Gift Body. For example, autopsied bodies typically are not usable for educational purposes. Similarly, bodies that are grossly obese, have sustained destructive trauma, or have donated major organs (except eyes) will be refused. The University will also refuse to accept the bodies of individuals who are HIV positive or who have been at high risk for HIV, or who have other communicable diseases (for example, hepatitis, tuberculosis, antibiotic resistant bacterial infections, etc.) that would pose a hazard to faculty, staff or students. The University may also refuse a body due to oversupply or changes in the educational program. If PNWU refuses to accept a Gift Body, the University will not be liable for any charges for embalming or transportation.

The remains of cadavers that are used by the University eventually are cremated individually. The cremated remains of a donated body can be returned to the family of the deceased, if so desired. Such a request must be made on the gift body form at the time of donation or made in writing when the body is delivered to the University. Cremated remains not returned to the family will be interred or placed in a dedicated site. The University may retain for continued study certain parts (i.e., skeleton) of those bodies for which remains are not to be returned to the family.

The University, its faculty and its students accord the highest respect to the bodies that are used for educational programs. The donation of one’s body in order to advance the knowledge and skills of physicians and other health care providers is a selfless, generous act that is cherished by the University.