Donors' families grieve all over again

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By Stewart Yerton

When Robin Ragan's mother said that upon her death she wanted her body donated to science, Ragan supported her wish. So when Mary Phillips Munster died of complications from cancer in May 2001, at the age of 71, the family drafted a handwritten note donating her body to Tulane University.

Mary Phillips Munster's husband, Jack Munster, signed the note and wrote a check for $75 to cover the expense of moving the body to the university. Now Ragan and her father, both of Metairie, say they want to know exactly what happened to their loved one's remains.

Like other survivors of people who have donated their bodies to science in Louisiana, Ragan was shocked and saddened this week by reports that Tulane had used a middleman to send bodies from its program to other research institutions. In one instance, bodies from Tulane and the LSU Health Sciences Center in Shreveport were sent to the Army, which used the cadavers in land-mine experiments.

News of the body donor programs at Tulane and LSU Health Sciences Center-Shreveport has come alongside more gruesome news from the body donor program at the University of California-Los Angeles. Last weekend, the program's director, Henry Reid, was arrested by campus police, accused of illegally selling body parts. Reid has said he is innocent. UCLA has said it will stop accepting donated bodies until it completes an investigation.

This week, officials at Tulane said the university had suspended its relationship with National Anatomical Service of Staten Island, N.Y., the cadaver broker that sent the Tulane bodies to the Army. Mary Bitner Anderson, co-director of Tulane's Willed Body Program and the head of a panel to study the university's donor program, said use of the university's cadavers in the mine experiments was wrong.

It is not publicly known whose bodies were used in the land-mine experiments. Army spokesman Chuck Dasey said privacy laws prohibit the Army from releasing the names of the donors used in the experiments. Officials with the LSU Health Sciences Center in Shreveport also said they could not release the names of individual donors, citing privacy restrictions.

Tulane is releasing limited information. On Wednesday, Anderson told The Associated Press that Tulane receives as many as 150 cadavers a year but uses only between 40 and 45 for classes. On Thursday, Tulane officials did not return calls. However, the university issued a statement saying Tulane may transfer excess donations to other medical or teaching institutions. "In such cases," Tulane said, "the university is reimbursed only for the costs related to the preservation of the body."

The recent reports leave survivors such as Ragan wondering what happened to their relatives, fearing that the bodies were sent somewhere for a grisly military experiment or exploited by middlemen in the grim business of the cadaver trade. Family members say that very uncertainty has contributed to their anguish and anger.

"It's like a horrible, horrible nightmare," Ragan said.

The body business

When Connie Blanchard Stropolo said she wanted to donate her body to science, her daughter, Laurie Blanchard, was apprehensive. Driving the fears, Blanchard said, were worries about "the things that would happen to the body."

Still, the family honored Stropolo's wishes, and when the former special education school teacher died in September, after four years fighting cancer, Stropolo's body went to Tulane, Blanchard said.

Now Blanchard says she's convinced her mother wouldn't be happy about the decision. Even if her mother's body wasn't one of the ones used in the Army experiments -- the timing of Stropolo's death suggests she wasn't -- Blanchard said she's still outraged.

"It annoys me that it happened to somebody else," she said.

Blanchard also questions why Tulane would accept more bodies than it needs.

"If there's such an overflow of cadavers, why do they accept them?" she said. "Why not cremate them and return the remains immediately?"

Blanchard also has strong opinions about John Vincent Scalia, chief
Next time somebody in his family dies, let them send their body to the military," she said. "I think he should be punished, I really do."

Likewise, Joyce Connell of Bossier City expressed irritation about National Anatomical Service.

Connell's husband, Ryan, arranged for his body to be donated to the LSU Health Sciences Center in Shreveport when he died in March 1995, she said. As a 28-year veteran of the Air Force, he wouldn't have had a problem with his body being used by the military if the research "could save some GI's life," his wife said.

Nonetheless, Joyce Connell said, news of the cadaver programs was the talk of her morning exercise class Thursday, and for some people, the Army experiments were beyond the pale.

What bothers Connell, she said, is one of the little-known business aspects of the body donor business that has emerged. Although it technically is illegal to sell corpses, middlemen such as National Anatomical Service can charge handling fees for delivering the bodies, and Scalia said this week at that he has a right to make money. The Army has said Scalia charged about $30,000 for seven bodies sent from Tulane.

"That made me ill, the idea of the fees and the money collected... It smacked of the 1800s and grave-robbing," Connell said.

Ragan, too, is sickened by the idea that people could have made money from her mother's donated body. But she said, that's the least of her worries.

"You know what's the worst of it for me?" she said. "My father's got this image of the woman he loved being blown up by the Army."

For others, the reports have reopened wounds they thought had healed. Lee Coulon was a Tulane graduate and lifelong fan of the university's athletic teams, he went to Tulane for medical treatments, and when he died in 2001, he donated his body to his alma mater, said his daughter, Monique Coulon Nemeth.

Nemeth, who choked back tears as she talked, said she grieved when her father died and again when his ashes were returned to the family about two years after his death. Now, she said, she is grieving yet again.

"It's like having to deal with my father's death all over again," she said.

'A bad feeling'

Ragan said her concerns began months ago.

Tulane's official donor form says nothing about when it will return the remains of a donor in the form of ashes; indeed, a one-page fact sheet about the program says the required time for study can be "two years or even longer."

Ragan insists she was told the family would have her mother's remains back within two years at the most. So when the second anniversary of Mary Munster's death came, Ragan said, she and her father began to call the university.

Jack Munster said he called the university in June 5, 2003, and was told that his wife's remains were being used in a class and that her ashes would be returned soon. When the ashes hadn't arrived by fall 2003, Ragan said, she called Tulane and asked where Mary Munster's remains were. Ragan said she was told her mother's body was being used in a class and that the ashes would be sent to the family soon.

As the holidays approached, the family still had not received the ashes, Ragan said. She called Tulane again and said her father was sick and that the family really wanted the ashes. Again, she said, the university said it was still using the body and would return the ashes soon.

By this time, Ragan said, she was getting "a very uneasy feeling."

Ragan said she told a university administrator that the family wanted a full report of how her mother's body had been used, what classes had used it and what sort of students had benefited.

Ragan was feeling guilty about her suspicions, she said. After all, Tulane was a highly respected institution, and she had little beyond her intuition telling her something was amiss.

"I said, "You know, Daddy, this gives you a bad feeling,"" she said. ""You know, they give you a bag of ashes, and you don't even know it's your loved one."

In January, Ragan said, she called Tulane again and was told the ashes would be coming within 30 days. Ragan said she repeatedly asked to see her mother's body, or even a part of it, so she could know with certainty where the body was.
"I said, 'Listen, I can handle it. I want to know, I have a right to know,' “ she said. "They can show me her foot, and I'll know it's my mother; they can show me her hand, and I'll know it's my mother."

But, she said, the university declined her requests.

Last weekend, the news of UCLA's donor program began to break.

"I said, 'You know, Daddy, this sickens my stomach. This isn't just UCLA, this is nationwide;’ “ she said.

A few days later, stories about Tulane's program, which were initially reported in the March issue of Harper's Magazine, broke in the local media.

"All the fears we've been having seem to be coming true,” she said.

Ragan and Laurie Blanchard, Connie Stropolo's daughter, share overriding feelings. Both said they want answers. But most of all, the survivors say, they want the remains of their loved ones.

"We want our momma,” Blanchard said.

On Wednesday afternoon, standing with a picture of Mary Munster as a young mother with her three children, Ragan and her father echoed Blanchard's sentiment.

"He just wants the love of his life back,” Ragan said.

"We just want her ashes back,” Jack Munster said.

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