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IS THERE A SKELETON IN YOUR CUPBOARD?

Recently, I was asked by an elder relative, a long retired medical doctor, to assist with the cleaning up of his garage. Last weekend, the work proceeded easily and happily, with the two of us working side by side and chatting, steadily clearing boxes and the naturally occurring detritus the result of my relative living 50 years in the same home.

Upon opening the umpteenth box, I was confronted by the sight of a skull, some large bones and a myriad of smaller bones. After showing my relative, I was told: *"Oh, that Herman !! I've had him since I was a student of anatomy in the early 1950s"*.

"Do you want to keep him?" I asked. *"No!!"* was the strong reply *"I've not practiced medicine this century, so I have no need of Herman any longer. Time he was properly dealt with"*.

My first thought was: *"How do I get rid of a human body, even if it's a skeleton?"* and I suddenly had flash backs to American gangster movies ... an acid bath? at sea? in the neighbour's garden? under the petunias? or in a shallow grave in a local National Park. What if I get caught? What if the bones are later found and I'm caught on camera dealing with them? Visions of handcuffs and the inside of a Police cell quickly came to mind. As a retired lawyer, those options were not attractive.

As my more rational self kicked in a few moments later, I thought that although over 60 years old, these bones were someone's child and were a human being, so they must be treated with all due respect and dignity as to their disposal.

Soon followed an internet search, which did not yield any useful information relevant to Australia, so I resolved that I'd contact the Australian Medical Association by email and seek their advice. After all, my relative was a retired doctor and I was sure that Herman was not the only anatomical specimen circulating in the medical profession. Surely, they could give relevant advice.

The AMA replied by email shortly after, diving for cover and directing me to the Dept of Health. No help or after sales service there !!

A call to the Dept of Health went through a bureaucratic circle and I ended up in their Environmental Section. We both wondered why that was a good option. However, the kindly official advised I call the Coroner.

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The Coroner's help line was a great help, both in terms of legal and practical advice, over a call lasting a few minutes. Here are the key takeouts:

"You just can't bury or cremate the bones, only registered personnel can do that;"

"The skeleton needs to get to us, but you can't drop it in, it can only come to us through the Police;"

"Don't just show up with the box and the bones at the Police Station, you could end up scaring someone or ending up in a police cell until its origins are sorted out;" and

"Keep stressing to the Police that the skeleton is an anatomical specimen".

Taking all pieces of advice, I called our local Police Station, who were very understanding. The officer who took my call did agree that just showing up with Herman tucked under my arm could have landed me in a cell (I'm fairly sure he was joking) and later in the day following an appointment as to time, , three Police, arrived at my relative's home to review the situation and take possession of Herman.

However, that process took some time as they needed to fill out a 14 page Form P79A, which deals with how the Police come across bodies and why they need to go to the Coroner. It covered murder, car accidents, drownings, misadventure and a myriad of other ways citizens meet their Maker. Strangely, no section for anatomical remains, so the Form does require expansion.

A quick call by the Policeman in Charge of the visit to the local Inspector to ensure that a crime scene and the intervention of Detectives was not required and Herman left, properly packaged and treated respectfully, under Police escort on his journey to the Coroner.

On a less whimsical note, my earlier call to the Coroner's Office also revealed just how sensitive the staff were to the proper and respectful treatment of bodies and skeletons. I was told that Herman would be checked to see it was not the subject of foul play and if his origins were aboriginal, then special arrangements would be made for the bones to be returned to that community. I had the sense of the process being one of dignity and professionalism.

Subsequent internet research has also revealed that in the 1950s there was a brisk trade in skeletons in NSW Medical Schools. Most came from India and their origins were suspect, probably a result of grave robbers. That makes me sad and confirmed by determination that Herman was properly treated. I suspect that Herman has many countrymen in other boxes in the possession of other retired and practicing medicos and I hope they will receive respectful treatment.

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So, if you also have a skeleton in your (or a relative's) cupboard you now know what to do with it.

The whole experience left me feeling I'd done the right thing, not only in accordance with the law, but in respect for Herman and its contribution to the practice of medicine in NSW.

Brian Williamson