

## Consent Issues of Human Bodies Used for Medical Research in Ancient Period

### BODY SNATCHING

Grave robbing. Tomb raiding. Body snatching. You're very likely to have heard one of these names. The act of uncovering a grave and taking the body parts is a practice rife with conflicting views, between the moral wrongness of desecrating a grave, to the necessary history of medical advancement.

Consent became a far lesser concern for the individuals using these bodies for research, or simply as income, and with a lack of this consent came the loss of identity from the dead. Here, we look at the history of body snatching and how the medical community benefited from the human remains obtained from the practice, and the impact shown of this in both medical history and society.

The 18th century gave rise to a number of private anatomy schools in London, and this in turn gave a shortage of bodies available to use within these schools. As such, the demand of bodies, or 'cadavers' became great enough to begin a new and dangerous line of work. The title of "resurrectionists" was given to those who dug up corpses for use in anatomy schools.



**A nightwatchman disturbs a body-snatcher who has dropped the stolen corpse he had been carrying in a hamper, while the anatomist runs away**

Austin, William  
Date May 1773  
Reference 25668i

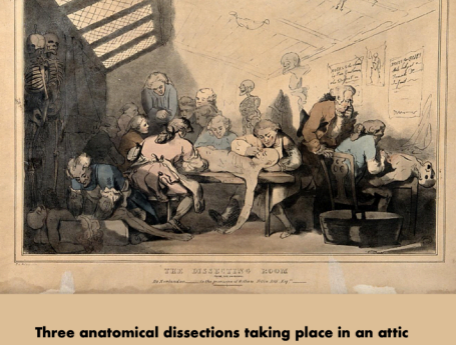
A key figure of the time, William Hunter, who ran an anatomy school, became a feature in many satirical prints surrounding body snatching. In this print, the anatomist running away is speculated to be Hunter himself. The note on the floor, reading "Hunter's lectu" points towards him even more.



**William Hunter (1718-1783) in his museum in Windmill Street on the day of resurrection, surrounded by skeletons and bodies, some of whom are searching for their missing parts**

Creator Unknown  
Date 8 February 1782  
Reference 25435i

How would you feel about your body being used after you die? We see here a real impact of the lack of consent for bodily autonomy. The religious setting suggests those used as cadavers face damnation due to the acts of anatomists. Within a religiously influenced society, the need for body autonomy becomes a greater concern.



**Three anatomical dissections taking place in an attic**

Rowlandson, Thomas  
Date Unknown  
Reference 25405i

This crowded room of eager students studying a variety of cadavers presents us with a struggle, between what is morally right for the dead, and the benefit their death provided. Perhaps, we are left to wonder what would become of medicine if this practice was ended before it could flourish as it did.



**Mortsafe in Banchory Devenick graveyard, Aberdeenshire**

J. Ritchie  
Date Unknown

**Railings used to protect graves from body snatchers**

Photographer Unknown  
Date Unknown

As body snatching became more and more of a public concern, measures were taken to protect the graves of friends and family from these acts of theft. The use of grave fences and mortsafes became incredibly popular to protect the desecration of graves, though this was a luxury only those who could afford to do so would get. Whilst it mostly prevented a visit from the resurrectionists, these builds represent some of the anxieties of the times to protect their loved ones.

### ● The Anatomy Act

The Anatomy Act of 1832 regulated the use of human remains for medical research. Whilst previously only the bodies of executed criminals were legally available for dissection, the act allowed any 'unclaimed bodies' to be accessed, reducing the shortage of bodies that lead to such prevalent body snatching. Provided no relative objected, a person who had lawful possession of a body could allow it to be dissected.

The act also required anyone practicing anatomy to have a licence, who reported to the Home Secretary, who knew the whereabouts of every cadaver. However, this did not solve the issues that managed to slip under the regulations. People also protested against the act, believing that it failed to prevent the sale of paupers' bodies, did not respect these 'unclaimed bodies', and did not make reparations for those already used within anatomy schools.