

In New York, a Grisly Traffic in Body Parts

Illegal Sales Worry Dead's Kin, Tissue Recipients

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NEW YORK -- Hundreds of very live Americans are walking around with pieces of the wrong dead people inside of them.

A macabre scandal has spread from a body-harvesting lab in New Jersey to hospitals as far away as Florida, Nebraska and Texas as hundreds of people discover that they have received tissue and bone carved from looted corpses, not least the cadaver of Alistair Cooke, the late and erudite host of PBS's "Masterpiece Theatre."

The Brooklyn district attorney and federal Food and Drug Administration inspectors are investigating dozens of funeral homes in New York City and Biomedical Tissue Services Ltd. of Fort Lee, N.J., which is run by a former dentist who, his lawyer acknowledges, abused intravenous pain medications while with patients.

The former dentist came to funeral homes, investigators say, and extracted bone, tendons and skin from corpses without the consent of relatives. Later, Biomedical Tissue Services shipped coolers full of tissue to hospitals for surgeries. A dead body can be worth tens of thousands of dollars when it is dissected for parts.

The scandal raises questions about the safety and proper supervision of a billion-dollar-a-year industry that supplies skin and tissue for 1 million tissue transplants each year. But patients are most confounded by the skin-crawling fact that no one knows from whom the bone and tissue was harvested.

Heather Augustin, 42, lives in southern New Jersey and had two disks in her neck removed last year, supposedly replaced with bone taken from a youngish corpse. Three months later, her surgeon told her that her new neck bone had in fact come from rogue funeral homes, likely from the cadaver of a very old person.

Augustin hasn't slept particularly well since.

"You think, 'I'm carrying a bone in my neck from someone who didn't want to get chopped up,' " she said. "I'm, like, in total shock. What am I supposed to do with these thoughts?"

FDA spokesmen say risk of serious infection is fairly remote, though an agency advisory adds the caveat that the "actual infectious risk is unknown." A 41-year-old woman who underwent back surgery on Long Island and two patients in New Jersey say they contracted syphilis from stolen bone tissue.

The FDA forbids body-harvesting firms from cutting up cancerous and diseased corpses. In all cases, harvesters are supposed to screen cadavers based on age and cause of death, and harvested tissue is tested for disease and treated with antiviral or antibacterial agents.

"We know that they obtained these bodies in a fraudulent way and off the scale of acceptable practice," FDA spokesman Stephen King said.

Bone can be transplanted whole or fashioned into chips for spinal fusion surgery. Much harvested skin -- about 18,900 square feet of it in 2003 -- goes to burn victims.

The Daily News broke the scandal in October, fingering several Brooklyn funeral home operators who had harvested patients without the permission of family members. In one case, reporters found that the English Brothers Funeral Home had forged consent and cause-of-death documents and allowed Biomedical Tissue Services to harvest the cancer-ridden body of Michael Bruno, a 75-year-old former cabbie.

That article ran under the headline "They Carved Up My Father!" The funeral home did not return calls seeking comment.

The New York City medical examiner's office in the past few months has exhumed three bodies from cemeteries in Brooklyn and Queens. Investigators discovered one female cadaver missing about half its body.

The New Jersey biomedical firm shipped large coolers filled with tissue to five suppliers across the nation. No one knows how many patients are affected. But the examples uncovered so far are suggestive:

Between early 2004 and September 2005, 60 surgical patients at Shore Memorial Hospital in Somers Point, N.J., received implants said to have originated with the corpse-snatching ring. Another 74 patients in Nebraska received stolen bone tissue during surgeries in the same period.

Biomedical Tissue Services operated out of a third-floor office suite not far from the George Washington Bridge, on the fringe of a large industry with a low profile. Its president is Michael Mastromarino, who once had a thriving dental practice off Fifth Avenue and a specialty in implant surgery. Over the years, he struggled with drug abuse and was sued for malpractice by several patients, one of whom accused Mastromarino of deserting a patient under general anesthesia in mid-operation.

Mastromarino was found, according to the lawsuit, in his bathroom with a hypodermic needle stuck in his arm, blood on the floor. Mastromarino surrendered his dental license six years ago, went into rehab and two years ago went into the tissue recovery business.

His lawyer, Mario Gallucci, said his client never broke the law. It's the funeral parlor's job to obtain consent from prospective donors, he said. Mastromarino and his employees would simply show up and harvest tissue, taking a cursory look to make sure it was viable and the body as described.

"If you're told by the funeral home that it's a 45-year-old woman and you show up and she's 90 years old, there's a problem," Gallucci said.

Biomedical Tissue Services was not an accredited member of the American Association of Tissue Banks, nor did the company ever apply. But Robert Rigney, who heads the association, said he doubted anyone now living with tissue originating from the company is in any kind of health danger, because the processors the company dealt with would have subjected any tissue to screening.

Still, Rigney is appalled. "If these people did what is alleged here, what they have done is unconscionable," he said.

Alistair Cooke died of cancer at age 95 in March 2004. He wanted to be cremated, and harbored a horror of being cut open. His daughter, a pastor in Vermont, said district attorney's investigators contacted her recently to say they had discovered forged papers, allegedly signed by Cooke's family, allowing his bones and tissue to be removed. Investigators said they had evidence his body parts had been implanted in patients but declined to provide details.

Cooke was far too old to be an acceptable candidate for tissue harvesting, and his daughter, the Rev. Susan Cooke Kittredge, said she had never given permission.

"I am surprised by how upset I am," said Kittredge, who said she favors organ donation. "You wanted to remember your loved one in the fullness of life. But I've lived with the image of his cadaver pressed against my face now for a month.

"You have lives torn asunder, and I hope the people responsible for these desecrations get their comeuppance."

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