SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

POLICY ON HUMAN SKELETAL REMAINS COLLECTION

ENDORSED BY SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM BOARD - JUNE 1987
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Introduction: The S.A.M. Human Biology Collection

The South Australian Museum has human skeletal remains which form part of its Anthropology Collection. This Collection, the Human Biology Collection, contains some 2,000 specimens from all over the world, including European samples. In the main, it is made up of crania and skeletons from Australia. There are also casts of fossil material from elsewhere in the world.

The Collection is maintained solely because of its scientific significance. It has been the basis of important developments in human biology and particularly in medicine and dentistry and it continues to be studied by scholars from all over the world. Similar research is carried out in many countries on collections of remains from all human populations including Europeans.

For Aboriginal people, such research provides important information about their ancestors and their way of life. In addition, there are also direct medical and health benefits to Aborigines, including improved orthopedic procedures and discovery of significant data on diseases.

The Human Biology Collection is legally held in trust by the Museum on behalf of all South Australians including Aboriginal people. However, the
Museum recognizes that Aboriginal people have a special relationship with the Collection and that they are concerned about the issue of human remains and their treatment. It is for this reason that the Museum is currently initiating consultations with the relevant Aboriginal people and groups about the Collection so that we can find out their views on this important matter. The consultations will include discussion on issues of curation, access, acquisition and the return of reburial material. This document puts forward the Museum’s views on these issues.

**The Origins of the Collection**

In General, specimens in the Museum Collection were either purchased from reputable scientific sources, or were presented by government officers (e.g. police) or members of the public. A relatively small proportion was collected from archaeological sites by Museum staff. Much of the material came into the Museum in the period between the turn of the century and the 1930s. Since that time most deposits of human remains in the Museum have been the result of presentations. Apart from the Roonka project between 1962 and 1978, there has been no active programme to acquire new material. In general, the antiquity of the material in the Collection is unknown. However the large majority predates European arrival in Australia.

The majority of the Collection is made up of cranial material - that is, skulls or parts of skulls. More than 60% of this is South Australian in origin and in turn more than half of this is from within 100km of Adelaide.
Kinds of Research Done on the Collection and Its Benefits

The basic and most commonly used technique for studying skeletal remains is simple measurement. Many and varying dimensions are gathered for different elements of particular sets of remains. Comparison of these over a range of individuals in the same and in different sample populations provides the means for determining factors such as ethnic group, age and sex as well as providing information on more general things such as the way of life and culture of the group represented by particular individuals. Often human remains are the only source of information on the health, diet and lifestyle of precontact Aboriginal people. Thus it is a vitally important means of learning about many aspects of the prehistoric Aboriginal heritage.

The Collection’s importance is reflected in the fact that it has been extensively and widely used by scientists, over many years. Government officers regularly use it for forensic and coronial work. It has been regularly used by anatomists in studying the morphological features of different populations. Paleontologists have learned a great deal about Aboriginal origins through research on the Collection, while archaeologists have used it to gain a picture of ancient Australian population structure.

Some of the most famous studies based on the SAM Collection have resulted in benefits of immediate practical relevance to Aboriginal people. For instance, Dr. P.R. Begg’s examination of the Collection in the 1930’s produced a revolutionary new orthodontic treatment which has been adopted throughout the world. Similarly, Dr Cecil Hackett’s research on SAM material contributed to the development of a cure for yaws, a fatal
disease once widespread in much of Aboriginal Australia and around the world.

With the development of new techniques, components of human biology collections are often re-examined many times. Older conclusions have been or will be continually reassessed as new ideas and new methods emerge. This means that the full potential of the material can never be finally realised and specimens disposed of, without leaving many questions unanswered and unanswerable. There is hope that, for instance, new research methods will bring to light new and beneficial information on diseases particularly affecting Aboriginal people such as diabetes.

The Museum’s view is that the heritage value and the scientific importance of the Human Biology Collection are inseparable. In other words, we recognise the Collection as part of the heritage of Aboriginal people. However, as trustees of this Collection, our view is that continued scientific work on it can add immeasurably to that heritage. Maintenance of the Collection and controlled research on it is in the best interests of all people, and perhaps especially Aboriginal people.

**Curation and Access**

Independent professional assessment has shown that curation of the Human Biology Collection has been done to the highest possible standard. The material in the Collection is never publicly displayed and is stored in a special restricted storeroom. All handling of items in the Collection is done with utmost care and respect for the material.
All access to the Collection must be approved by the Museum Board. In considering this, a balance is attempted between greatly limiting access out of respect for the origin of the material and limiting the possibility of damage to a very valuable resource, while at the same time providing sufficient access to ensure that maximum benefit is gained from the material.

Access is only given to qualified professional scholars or to Aboriginal people with particular relationships to the Collection. Further, investigators using the Collection have to agree not to publish or display material, such as photographs, which Aboriginal people may find offensive.

Destructive research is not carried out on the Collection under normal circumstances. A certain amount of analysis, as is normal in contemporary medicine, occasionally necessitates limited destructive analysis. This applies particularly to pathology and dating. The amounts used, however, rarely exceed the 1 – 2 grammes required by modern hospitals, for example, for a routine biopsy. Such analyses, as with loans of any material, are only carried out with the express permission of the Museum Board.

**Acquisition**

There are at present two main means by which the Museum may acquire further human remains: deposit by the South Australian Police and the unearthing of remains during the course of archaeological investigations.

The Museum has for many years been required by law to take into its collection human remains found by the police and determined to be
Aboriginal in nature. Our view is that this practice is discriminatory and should be discontinued. Until it is, the Museum, when given remains in this category, will endeavour to locate relatives of the deceased individuals or, at least members of a relevant Aboriginal community in order to discuss with them the future of the remains. The Museum has already returned for reburial the remains of a number of individuals which came into the Museum by this means.

Where human remains are discovered in the course of archaeological work the Museum, in so far as its staff are involved, will insist that researchers contact the relevant Aboriginal community for immediate discussions. The Museum would only agree to house within the Collection human remains from such work at the express wish of both the relevant Aboriginal people and the researcher.

**Consultation**

The Museum’s view is that full and frank consultation with Aboriginal people over the Collection is essential. Only then can we let people know of its existence and convey to them the benefits of continuing scholarly research on it. This has already been done to some extent with the material in the Collection from Roonka.

The Museum intends to organise information on the Collection to determine the relevant contemporary communities. It will then enter into consultations with those communities firstly, to let people in those communities know what is in the Collection, how it got there, how it is cared for and the specific and general benefits of scholarly research on
the material. Secondly, we will aim to produce joint plans with respect to options for the future of the part of the Collection relevant to the community. With respect to access, one possible arrangement may be that research on parts of the Collection is only done following consultation by the investigator (in conjunction with Museum staff) with the relevant Aboriginal groups.

**Return of Material**

Aboriginal opinion and custom varies considerably on the matter of human remains. Given that we have material from all over Australia, it is difficult to produce a simple, blanket policy regarding return of material. We also seek policy input from those Aboriginal individuals and groups that have relationships with the Collection. However, in the meantime the Museum will consider requests for return of remains which are in certain categories:

1. Where material is the remains of a known and named Aboriginal person whose lineal descendants are identified, and make a request for the return of those remains;

2. Where the material is post-contact in nature;

3. Where it can be shown that the material was obtained by illegal or unethical means.

With respect to the first category, the Museum will, where possible, make attempts to locate descendants to let them know the material is in the
Collection and to engage them, should they so desire, in discussions on the future storage of the remains.

The Museum is also willing to discuss the future of other parts of the Collection – for example, remains from particular sites – with relevant Aboriginal communities.

**Conclusion**

The Museum’s view is that its Human Biology Collection is an extremely important one, and that in general it should be available for research. We do, however, support Aboriginal requests for a greater say in access and storage location and arrangements. We also agree that certain types of remains should be returned.

We want to actively engage Aboriginal people who have relationships with parts of the Collection in consultation over the whole issue. We want to let them know what is in the Collection and argue the case of the benefits to Aboriginal people of continued research. We also want to hear Aboriginal views on the matter. In our consultations we would like to explore the possibilities of, for example, local ‘keeping place’ arrangements. Access could then only be gained through consultation with the relevant Aboriginal groups and the merits of research obtained by that access would have to be demonstrated and discussed at that stage. Some communities may choose to continue to store remains with which they are associated, in the S.A. Museum, while maintaining rights to control access. This is something the Museum would support and a similar arrangement for
SAM’s Secret/Sacred Collection has proved most satisfactory to Aboriginal people with rights in that Collection.

The above plans have certain funding and staff implications. Ideally, the Collection needs its own curator who would be responsible for it and for coordinating the consultations with Aboriginal people. The Museum would also like to involve Aborigines directly, as staff, in dealing with this issue. Given the Collection’s scientific importance and the urgent necessity to gain Aboriginal views on its future, we will seek State Government support for such positions.

In the interim, a full survey of the Collection should be undertaken prior to any further reburials of remains. This is something for which a strict time limit should be set, to allay Aboriginal fears of indefinite uncertainty over the Collection. Consultations, as outlined above, should proceed immediately. We will need to seek external funds to engage qualified biological anthropologists for both the survey and the consultations.