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What is MedCure?

MedCure is an organization that facilitates the pairing of whole body anatomical donations with the researchers, physicians, and scientists who are working to advance the science of medicine and the quality of human life. Many people wish to leave a legacy after their passing, or to perform a final act of generosity by donating their bodies to science. MedCure aids in this process by securing donor and/or family consent and then matching donors with the research and medical entities that can make the best use of these gifts in the development of new techniques, treatments, and medical devices. We adhere to a strict set of ethical standards regarding confidentiality, conduct, and industry best practice. Some scientific advances achieved through anatomical research include:

- The development of implanted medical devices such as pacemakers and defibrillators
- The development of surgical robotic equipment
- Training physicians and surgeons on new, more effective surgical and medical procedures
- The development of better medication delivery systems
- Advanced understanding of diseases such as cancer, Alzheimer's, and cardiovascular disease

While computer simulations and anatomical models are valuable resources, there is no substitute for the experience of working on human bodies. Doing so protects future living patients by ensuring medical professionals maintain the highest levels of skill and experience.

What is the difference between MedCure and the “body brokers” listed in the Reuters article?

Medical research plays a vital role in maintaining and improving the health of all people, but it is not always pleasant to think about the reality of how doctors and scientists gain their hard-earned insights. To study anatomy using human cadavers might seem grim at first thought, but this kind of work was instrumental in lifting medicine out of the Dark Ages, when such practices were taboo, and it remains instrumental to medical advancement today.

Unfortunately, horrific tales of grave robbing in previous centuries and the natural human distaste for disturbing our friends and relations who have passed away have caused many people to view anatomical research with suspicion. This suspicion is carried into modern times when the media reports on the unethical and improper behaviors exhibited by unregulated and unscrupulous individuals in the industry. These players may justly be called “body brokers,” as they operate without regard for the respect owed to body donors and their families, or the safety and reputations of the medical and scientific research communities they are supposed to serve.

MedCure is an accredited and regulated institution. We voluntarily adhere to best-in-class industry standards for safety, ethics, and transparency. We are subject to internal and third-party audits to ensure compliance with regulatory and accreditation standards that map closely to FDA and biotech industry standards. The body donation industry as a whole is largely unregulated, but we vehemently believe this must change in order to eliminate body brokers and the abuses they perpetrate. In keeping with this philosophy, we are working to bring greater regulation and oversight to the industry as a whole, beginning with legislation we recently helped introduce in the Oregon state legislature.

How does MedCure make money?

MedCure acts as a service provider to the medical research community. We charge service fees to research organizations, device manufacturers, and medical institutions to source and provide the anatomical specimens necessary for research and innovation. For example, if a clinical research group performs a study that requires 10 female femurs, MedCure will procure, test, match, and prepare the specimens, as well as provide the surgical training facility, equipment, and instrumentation necessary for safe and sterile clinical practice. All of our research partners are carefully vetted and agree to allow us the right to audit their programs and facilities to ensure they abide by our systems and practice guidelines. We hold ourselves to the strictest ethical standards, and we expect our partners to do the same.

MedCure does not profit from the generous donations entrusted to our care. We adhere to the principles set down by the Uniform Anatomical Gift Act, which prohibits the buying and selling of human tissue. We are humbled by and grateful for the altruism exhibited by our donors, and it is our highest goal to ensure that we honor their gifts by holding ourselves and our research partners to the highest ethical standards.

What does it mean to be accredited? How is that regulated?

MedCure is voluntarily accredited by the AATB (American Association of Tissue Banks), the highest available accrediting organization in our industry. We also comply with all relevant regulations, including the FDA's good tissue practices and Uniform Tissue Standards practices. Each state has its own ethics and safety regulations, and we follow these regulations as well.

Are all body donation centers on the up and up?

There are only a handful of organizations in the United States that have earned accreditation by the AATB, but many more who accept anatomical donations without outside oversight. AATB accredited organizations meet monthly to share best practices, exchange knowledge, and define the industry. They also adhere to mandatory audits and on-site inspections. We've also participated in the revision of the standards to improve practice and have all operated to the highest standards of integrity, ethics and practical rigor.

Why is MedCure being investigated by the FBI?

Because the FBI investigation is ongoing, we are unable to speak in detail on this topic. We believe the inquiry is likely tied to recent stories about the "bad actors" in the tissue industry—those who do not follow the rules or comply with regulatory and accreditation standards.

We strongly believe in our mission, our standards, and the work we do here, and we have been 100% transparent with the investigation. We are fully committed to and continue to adhere to the highest internal, third-party, and government requirements, including those of the FDA, CDC, Oregon Health Authority, and AATB. We are fully operational and maintain our accreditation from the AATB, as well as our license from the Oregon Health Authority, which was renewed in January of this year.

How have your operation standards changed since the FBI raid?

We have not changed our operational standards as a result of the raid. On an ongoing basis, we review our operations to refine and enhance all aspects of our business, to ensure we appropriately and ethically honor patients' wishes and support the advancement of science and medicine.

How can you assure potential body donors that they or their loved ones will be handled ethically and with dignity?

When a researcher contacts us seeking to initiate a working relationship, we take them through an extensive vetting process where we find out their intended use for the anatomical specimen, how they plan to perform their research, and confirm that the people involved are trained professionals. These researchers must follow strict agreements regarding storage, transportation, and traceability of donated specimens. We also ensure that we maintain the right to go into our partners' facilities to verify and audit their research, further assuring compliance with appropriate codes of conduct. As a policy, we don't work with anyone we don't trust or about whom we have concerns.

How do you make sure families are informed about what happens to their loved ones?

Our donation coordination team spends a significant amount of time on the phone with families and/or donors answering questions and providing thorough documentation of the details of what will happen to the donor's body. Upon request, MedCure can also send out a family letter explaining how the body was used (i.e. pain management study, etc.). We also communicate with the family regarding when they should expect to receive the cremated remains or when the scattering at sea has taken place.

What percentage of donations come from families who don't have the financial resources for typical cremation or burial?

MedCure does not track this data. While we are happy that our program can provide a no-cost option to people who lack the financial resources for a typical cremation or burial, our observations tell us that the majority of people who choose to donate their bodies to science do so out of a desire to contribute a lasting legacy to future generations.

How is whole body donation different from organ donation?

Organ donation is highly specialized and involves the transplantation of organs from donors into living patients. It makes the difference between life and death for thousands of people every year, however the requirements to qualify for organ donation are typically much stricter than those for whole body donation. For instance, only individuals who pass away in a hospital generally qualify as organ donors. MedCure serves as another option for those who want to contribute through donation but whose organs are not suitable for immediate lifesaving opportunities.

Why should someone donate themselves to MedCure verses a medical school or their college alma mater?

Donation to a medical school or university can have a similar benefit as donation to MedCure, however the opportunity to donate to educational institutions may be limited. Many don't have the capacity to accept everyone who wishes to donate, and many will only accept donation from those who pass in their immediate area. MedCure accepts body donations on a larger scale and from across the country.

How can someone looking to donate their body to science find a creditable place to donate?

The AATB has an online list of all accredited transplant and non-transplant organizations. This is a great resource to identify which program is best for you and your family. Be sure to look for the AATB logo for any organization you choose to work with.

How many whole body donations do you receive annually?

We can't say specifically how many donations we receive annually, but we can say that donation is becoming a much more mainstream choice. As awareness of body donation as an end-of-life option increases, we've begun to see an annual increase in donations of 35 percent.

Does MedCure have staff ethicists or counselors who talk potential donors through the process?

We have both donation program educators and donor coordinators. The donor educators speak with hospices, social workers, and other end-of-life professionals to provide information about our program, equipping these professionals to discuss whole body donation with interested patients and families.

We also have donor coordinators, trained professionals who are able discuss the legal requirements for body donation with prospective donors and families. We don't actively pursue donations, we only work to educate and provide services to interested parties.

Can you walk me through the process? (How does one officially sign-off on their body? Where do bodies go from the morgue?)

Once a donor or donor family has decided they would like to donate their body to MedCure, we're their first call after passing. Donor families contact a donation coordinator who will walk them through consent forms, review terms and conditions, collect power of attorney (if necessary), and collect a medical history and records. MedCure must then determine whether we can accept a body. In order to protect staff and clinical researchers, MedCure cannot accept bodies with communicable diseases. If we do accept a donation, we then dispatch a funeral home, hospice, or morgue and transport them to one of our five facilities around the country. From there, we facilitate the transfer of anatomical specimens to researches and medical professionals. After 8-12 weeks, MedCure sends the cremated remains back to families. Alternately, within 8-12 months after passing we can scatter remains at sea, depending on final wishes.

How—if at all—is MedCure different than other body donation organizations?

MedCure is voluntarily accredited by the AATB. There are only a handful of similarly accredited organizations in the country. These organizations meet monthly to share best practices, exchange knowledge, and define the industry. We participate in the revision of standards to improve practice, and we all operate according to the highest standards of integrity, ethics, and practical rigor.

We also comply with all relevant government regulations, including the FDA’s good tissue practices and Uniform Tissue Standards practices. Each state has its own ethics and safety regulations, and we follow these regulations as well.

What are the ethical issues unique to this industry?

Today, unfortunately, there are actors in our field who don’t adhere to ethical practices, don’t follow regulatory standards, and are not transparent in how they operate. These “body brokers” are antithetical to what we do at MedCure.

MedCure is an accredited and regulated institution. We voluntarily adhere to best-in-class industry standards for safety, ethics, and transparency. We are subject to internal and third-party audits to ensure compliance with regulatory and accreditation standards, which map closely to FDA and biotech industry standards. The tissue industry as a whole is largely unregulated, but we vehemently believe this must change in order to eliminate body brokers and the abuses they perpetrate.

MedCure facilitates hands-on educational and training experiences for surgeons and medical professionals of the future. While simulations and the use of anatomical models are valuable, there is no substitute for working on human bodies. This work protects future live patients and ensures the appropriate experience and competence of the medical professionals they entrust.

What are some common misunderstandings about body donation?

One of the most common misunderstandings about the industry is that we’ll take anyone who wishes to donate their body. Accredited donor institutions must protect both our staff and researchers. Therefore, we are unable to accept bodies with communicable diseases.

Another misconception is that we do not vet our research clients. When researchers contact us, they go through an extensive vetting process where we find out the intended use for the anatomical specimen, how they plan to perform their procedures, and confirm the people involved are trained professionals. These researchers must follow strict agreements around storage, transportation, and traceability. We also ensure we can go into facilities to verify and audit their research, further assuring compliance with appropriate codes of conduct. As a policy, we don’t work with anyone we don’t trust or about whom we have concerns.

What are the stats you can share re: who's doing this and why?

The pool of whole body donors includes a large group of people who have worked in the medical field and who have experienced first-hand the benefit body donors provide to medical education. Many of them wish to pay it forward and to participate in the education of future physicians and surgeons.

There are also many people who have experienced a severe or terminal illness, either personally or through having a loved one may have been afflicted. These individuals choose to become body donors in the hope of helping the medical community to better understand these illnesses and ultimately to find cures. We also recently conducted a global survey of 1,600 participants and learned that millennials and boomers are twice as likely to want to donate their body to science as members of Generation X. Of the 1,600 people who responded to the survey, 13% were interested in donating their bodies to science.

What are the (psychology/spiritual/religious) reservations people express?

One of the most common concerns that people have about body donation revolves around the question of whether or not the act is acceptable according to their religion. Many organized religions do approve of both organ and whole body donation, viewing this final act of generosity as a clear demonstration of their tenets of faith. Other groups may leave the deeply personal decision of donation up to the individual, however some religions may have specific doctrines governing anatomical donations. In these cases, it may be worthwhile to speak with your spiritual leader about how your faith views the act of giving.

Another fear some people may have is that registering to be an organ or body donor means that doctors will be more concerned with harvesting your organs than saving your life during a medical crisis. The Hippocratic Oath taken by physicians and other healthcare professionals requires that everyone in the field practice medicine ethically and “first, do no harm.” Preservation of life is the whole reason that organ and body donation exist, and the lives of potential donors are never considered an exception.

What are the immediate advantages available to a donor?

MedCure provides a no-cost option for final expenses. At a time of great emotional stress, donating to MedCure can ease worries over how to cope with the financial burden, if not the grief, involved in losing a loved one. MedCure covers transportation costs as well as cremation fees. We also coordinate everything, from the point of contact after passing to the disposition of cremated remains, which can provide solace to grieving families.

Additionally MedCure offers families a summary of how their loved one's donation has benefited medical science. Families can request a letter informing them of the studies their loved one participated in and how they contributed to the advancement medicine. This can help provide closure and a sense of peace after a loss and can give weight to the intrinsic humanitarian value of the donation.

Are these bodies going to scientific research? (No transplantation, right?)

We're not an organ donation facility, but we've had donors who have also donated to other organizations, such as eye and brain banks. The donor bodies are used for scientific research, medical device development, and surgical training.

At what age or point in life are people typically making the decision to donate their bodies?

We tend to see more baby boomers and those in the silent generation make the decision to donate their bodies. However, we accept pre-registration from donors 18 and older. Many of our donors are family members and friends of previous donors; they choose us because of their positive experience with MedCure.

What are the trends in body donation?

MedCure has seen 30% year-over-year growth. While body donation hasn't been normalized yet, it's becoming an increasingly viable option. This industry sees more than 20,000 donations a year. We equate the uptick in people who donate their bodies to science to the increased popularity of cremation over the last 60 years. In 1960, only 3.6% of Americans chose cremation; in 2016, 50% of all final arrangements ended in cremation.

Not only is whole body donation becoming a more mainstream end of life option, but according to an article released recently by the Catholic News Service, the Catholic Church now encourages the practice.

Do you expect that body donation will be the norm in the future?—for whatever reasons (and let's talk about the reasons)

Absolutely. More people than ever are witnessing medical advancements first hand and seeing how these advancements are bettering their lives. While organ donation has normalized over time and has a 95% approval rate in the United States, most people are not viable donors for organ transplant. If not accepted for organ donation, whole body donation allows those people to save future lives through helping to advance medicine and science.

Tell me about the founding of MedCure?

MedCure was founded in 2005 by Janis Locenieks and David Urbina.

David has worked in the tissue bank industry since its infancy 25 years ago. He previously served as the director of a tissue bank in Arizona before he was recruited to work for a competing organization in the Portland area. While working as the program director in Portland, David met Janis when he hired his future business partner as a technician. David and Janis, who was pursuing his MBA at the time, developed a friendship and realized they shared similar ideas for how to grow the tissue bank program. They soon discovered that the owner of the company where they worked wasn't interested in making the necessary investments in marketing and donor research to grow his business, so Janis and David decided to create a better tissue bank. Their goals included the implementation of new ideas to increase donors, to offer bio skills labs and surgical skills courses, and to meet the growing demand for anatomical specimens. Janis' business acumen coupled with David's industry experience have proven a successful pairing. They maintain outstanding working relationships with researchers and educators who value the professionalism, quality, rigor, and transparency with which MedCure operates.

What is the whole body donation landscape? Who's in it?

In 2005, we were one of three or four tissue banks. By 2011, there were over 60, and today there are even more. MedCure is one of only a handful of organizations accredited by the AATB (American Association of Tissue Banks), the highest available accrediting organization in the industry. The organizations accredited by the AATB meet monthly to share best practices, exchange knowledge, and define the industry. We also adhere to mandatory audits and on-site inspections.

Regrettably, there is also a segment of the industry that is unethical and does not comply with industry standards. Often called body brokers, these individuals compromise the reputations of responsible, accredited tissue banks and cause harm to the fields of scientific and medical research. We fully support all efforts to intervene with these organizations and to prevent them from continuing to operate beyond the bounds of accepted industry practice.

Tell me about your company's growth?

Over the past five years, MedCure has experienced rapid growth—we regularly see 30 percent year-over-year increases in our donor numbers. Despite the growing number of tissue banks—not all of them operating ethically—we have established a reputation for providing high quality anatomical specimens to our customers. This has driven customer retention and new customer acquisition. Additionally, we now offer a wide range of services. We have established on-site bio skills labs in three of our MedCure facilities and also offer mobile bio skills labs. This is an efficient, effective way to deliver surgical training on-site at conferences, in hospitals, and at other locations convenient for participating surgeons.

Has your company experienced any bumps in the road?

Unfortunately, our biggest bump in the road so far has been the surge of “mom and pop” tissue banks and body brokers who have emerged in recent years. These people cast a bad light on our industry, and it can be difficult for an outsider to distinguish between these bad players and an accredited, above-board tissue bank. We spend a lot of time educating people about who we are, what we do, and the accreditation and regulatory standards under which we operate.

MedCure is an accredited and regulated institution. Not only do we voluntarily adhere to best-in-class industry standards for safety, ethics, and transparency, we are also subject to internal and third-party audits to ensure compliance with regulatory and accreditation standards that map closely to FDA and biotech industry standards. Additionally, we actively collaborate with other accredited tissue banks in working to bring greater rigor and transparency to the standards relevant to the industry.

The tissue industry as a whole is largely unregulated, but we vehemently believe this must change in order to eliminate the abuses perpetrated by unethical body brokers.

What is your strategy going forward? Where do you see yourself in the future?

We're working hard to normalize whole body donation right now. In much the same way that cremation has become more widespread in the last 60 years, we believe whole body donation will continue to grow in popularity. In 1960, only 3.6% of Americans chose cremations; by 2016, this number had ballooned to 50%. While MedCure has seen 30% year-over-year growth in whole body donations and the industry sees more than 20,000 donations a year, demand for anatomical specimens far exceeds supply. Medical research, education, and training rely on the availability of high-quality specimens to advance science, improve health care, and positively impact quality of life.

In addition to continuing to expand our domestic mobile bio-skills division so that surgeons can have hands on training wherever they may be, we also intend to grow our presence in the European market. We already have a facility in Amsterdam, and we are looking to create bio-skills labs in Amsterdam and Milan.

We see the opportunity for endless growth in the tissue bank industry as people become more aware of whole body donation as an end of life option beyond burial and cremation.

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