

Texas medical schools increasingly use unclaimed bodies

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In a new research letter published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, a professor and an undergraduate student from The University of Texas at Arlington found that the use of unclaimed bodies

in Texas medical schools is on the rise.

Eli Shupe, assistant professor of philosophy and humanities, co-authored "[Unclaimed Bodies and Medical Education In Texas](#)" with Serena Karim, an undergraduate in the College of Nursing and Health Innovation. Former UTA faculty member Daniel Sledge, now of the University of Oklahoma, also was co-author of the letter.

Their study looks at the use of unclaimed bodies—those not claimed by next of kin for burial or cremation—in gross anatomy education at Texas medical schools. From 2017 through 2021, the use of unclaimed bodies in Texas medical schools rose from 64 to 446, increasing from about 2% of bodies used in [medical education](#) to about 14%.

Shupe, who also is co-director of UTA's Medical Humanities and Bioethics program, called the use of unclaimed bodies "morally questionable."

"It's controversial for a good reason, because the people who leave unclaimed bodies tend to be people who belong to vulnerable and marginalized populations," said Shupe. "I think it's unfortunate that some portion of the cadavers used in medical teaching were procured with no consent. The principles of medical ethics care a lot about a person's autonomy and their right to choose what happens to their body."

Karim joined the research team through the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) at UTA.

"I was intrigued by this issue because I had no idea it was happening," Karim said. "We started collecting data from counties and eventually contacted the medical schools and verified all the numbers with the Texas State Anatomical Board."

Through UROP, Karim has worked on several research projects aligned with her interests in [health care](#), history and bioethics. Karim presented her research at the Texas Undergraduate Research Conference and landed coveted slots in the Hastings Center Summer Bioethics Program and the summer internship program at the Center for Health Humanities and Ethics at the University of Virginia.

"My research projects in bioethics and with Dr. Shupe have helped inform me of the qualities I want to embody as a nurse so that I can become a true patient advocate," Karim said. "With this study, my hope is that a conversation is started across academic, medical and political communities, reaching people who have the power to change this practice."

More information: Eli Shupe et al, Unclaimed Bodies and Medical Education in Texas, *JAMA* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2023.15132](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2023.15132)

Provided by University of Texas at Arlington

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