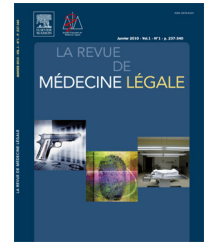




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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Human remains exhibition and ethics principles: A French medical experience and evaluation



*Exposition de restes humains et principes éthiques : expérience et évaluation médicale française*

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## KEYWORDS

Anthropology;  
Medical anatomy;  
Medical education;  
Body;  
Death;  
Cadaver

**Summary** Exhibition of human remains or fragments, recent and ancient, is current in anatomical, ethnographical and anthropological museums or structures. In 2011, was held in a village of Dordogne (center of France) an exhibition of around 120 mummified remains from Sicily (Italy), of historical origin, associated with a complete medical examination. In order to evaluate the respect of ethics principle relative to this large presentation of cadavers, and considering the recent problems caused in France and other European countries by the exhibition "Our Body/Body worlds", a list of questions was given to visitors dealing with their sentiment facing this context. We present here the results of this evaluation, and compare it with reactions facing the "Our body/Body worlds" exhibition. Important differences existed both on the respect of ethics principles, and the scientific context of the presentation. This research confirms that the exhibition of human tissues, organs or cadavers raises considerable ethical debate about treating human remains in this way, even in a biomedical context, an issue of particular relevance to anatomists, physicians, and anthropologists.

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**MOTS CLÉS**

Anthropologie ;  
Anatomie médicale ;  
Éducation médicale ;  
Corps ;  
Mort ;  
Cadavre

**Résumé** L'exposition de restes humains complets ou fragmentaires, anciens ou récents, est fréquente en contexte anatomique, ethnographique, anthropologique et médical. En 2011, s'est tenue dans un village de Dordogne (centre de la France) une exposition d'environ 120 restes momifiés venant de Sicile (Italie), d'origine historique, associée à un examen médical complet. Dans le but d'évaluer le respect des principes éthiques relative à cette présentation massive de corps morts, et compte tenu des problèmes récemment survenus en France et dans d'autres pays au décours de l'exposition « Our body/Body worlds », un questionnaire a été distribué aux visiteurs aux fins de cerner leur sentiment et leur ressenti. On présente ici les résultats de cette évaluation et on compare ceux-ci à ceux de l'exposition « Our body/Body worlds ». D'importantes différences existent autant dans le respect des principes éthiques, que dans le contexte scientifique de ces expositions. Cet article confirme qu'une présentation de tissus humains, d'organes ou de cadavres suscite un réel débat éthique, même dans un contexte bio-médical, au sein duquel anatomistes, médecins – a fortiori légistes – et anthropologistes prennent légitimement part.

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**Introduction**

How to expose the body? Exhibition of human remains or fragments, recent and ancient, is current in archaeological, ethnographical and anatomical museum or structures [1,2]. Human bodies are already legally displayed all around the world: thousands of 15th to 20th century. mummies in Italy [3–5], Egyptian mummies in many archaeological museums, anatomical preparations (including organs, hands, skulls, heads, isolated bones and whole skeletons, etc.) in medical and/or anthropological institutions. In 2011, was held in a village of Dordogne (center of France) an exhibition of around 120 mummified remains from Sicily (Italy), of archaeological origin. In order to evaluate the respect of ethics principle relative to this large presentation of cadavers, and considering the recent problems caused in France and other European countries by the exhibition "Our Body/Body worlds/Körperwelten", a list of question was given to visitors dealing with their sentiment facing this context. Indeed, the exhibition of human tissues, organs or cadavers raises considerable ethical debate about treating human remains in this way, an issue of particular relevance to anatomists and physicians.

**Material and methods**

Accompanying the biomedical 4th International Congress of Pathography, an exhibition was held in Saint-Jean-de-Côle (Dordogne, center of France) between the 13th of May and the 15th of August 2011, entitled "Mirror of time. The mummies from Randazzo (Sicily, 17th–19th century. AD)". This exhibition was organized by one of us (P. Charlier) and *dottoressa* Luisa Lo Gerfo, an Italian anthropologist, at the origin of the preliminary examination of the remains. Around 120 mummies discovered in 2008 during the restoration of an old church on the west slope of the volcano Etna were displayed with full archaeological and scientific explanations, under the auspices of the French Ministry of Culture [6].

A one-page questionnaire was given to all visitors (attendant to the congress, and further visitors), focused on the eventual negative impact of such an exhibition of human remains. Written in French language, an English translation is given in [Appendix A](#).

**Results**

A total of 243 questionnaires were recuperated at the end of the visit, including 19 from the congress' audience. Detailed results follow.

**General population**

A total of 224 questionnaires were completed (on a total of 1327 expected, i.e. 17%). Two hundred and twelve were answered by adults (83 males, 124 females, 6 missing) aged between 16 and 89-years-old (with a mean of 51.7 yrs.) and 12 by children (5 boys, 6 girls, 1 missing) aged between 7 and 14-year-old (with a mean of 11.3 years). A total of 25 adults were related to medical/paramedical activities, 7 to archaeology/history jobs and 1 to both.

Among the adults interrogated, 5.2% were shocked by the exhibition ( $n = 11$ ), mainly because of the "crude aspect of skulls", the "idea of being far away from the primitive location of these human remains", "the strange sensation of facing death (mirror effect)", "provocation of a kind of malaise", "emotion, especially with the baby mummy".

A total of 29% have already heard about the exhibition "Our body" ( $n = 61$ ), 49% of them with negative criticisms ( $n = 30$ ), mainly represented by "a pseudo-artistic presentation of recent cadavers", "a deviant exhibition", "incomplete data about the origin of the bodies", "absence of individual/patient consent prior to exhibition", "lack of human respect and dignity", "equivocal and non-natural posture", "kind of voyeurism" "gore and alluring exhibition".

Within the sample of individuals who heard about the exhibition "Our body", 57% of them considered the Randazzo exhibition as different ( $n = 35$ ), mainly because "less shocking, more pedagogical", "realistic without any voyeurism or provocation", "ethical sensibility", "high scientific background", "old/archaeological artifacts", "historical, not commercial goal of the exhibition", "originally mummified bodies, not transformed especially for the exhibition", "mainly heads and skulls, not full conserved bodies".

Indeed, the original context of this human sample was clearly presented for 94% of them ( $n = 200$ ).

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