

Commentary on: Huxley AK, Finnegan M. Human remains sold to the highest bidder! A snapshot of the buying and selling of human skeletal remains on eBay[®], and Internet auction site. *J Forensic Sci* Jan. 2004;(49)1:17–20.

Sir:

We read with interest the article by Drs. A. K. Huxley and M. Finnegan: "Human Remains Sold to the Highest Bidder," in the *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, Jan. 2004. We would like to offer some additional observations concerning sale of human skeletal remains, related items and services on the Internet, and through other sources.

As well as availability through auction on eBay, Yahoo, and related auction sites, at least three additional Internet sites for biologic supply houses directly sell skeletal remains. Walk in/cash and carry purchases are also available. These bones are generally unidentified or identified as Chinese origin with postmortem interval of 20 plus years, which have been donated, or "relocated." They are advertised as sold for educational or decorative purposes as well as training of cadaver dogs. Prices range from a sale price of \$10 for a patella to \$5000 for a complete skeleton (with three-year wait). A "first class quality" skull retails at approximately \$1595. "Decorative" human skulls are only \$595. Additionally, a body piercing and modification/tattoo website previously offered skulls and other human skeletal remains for sale. The sources were not identified. The materials included fetal skulls, modern skulls with healed injuries, and an alleged gunshot wound. Related items traded include skulls and bones kept as war trophies (W.W. II and Southeast Asia), "shrunk heads" (usually imitation, prepared of goat skin). One website additionally offers a bone skull-cleaning services using Dermested beetles. While there is a federal ban on the sale of Native American skeletal remains and artifacts, other skeletal remains (termed "natural bone" in the sale trade) may or may not be regulated by local law. Sale and trade through the Internet appears largely self-regulated or unregulated.

Public Internet trade in skeletal remains appears largely a North American phenomenon, or at least uncommon in Europe. European auction website searches do not reveal skulls or human skeletal remains. Sale to the general public appears extremely rare, although there is an informal small trade to the medical community (for example, student "bone boxes"), and occasionally collectors at battlefield sites recover bones. One website with an India domain advertised "human skulls, normal, and abnormal, legal, from various sources." A human skull allegedly from Tibet, decorated with silver inlay, was auctioned on U.S. eBay from a Hong Kong vendor. How many of all of the above are obtained /sold illegally, are authentic, or are active cases of forensic interest is unknown.

Concerning the risk of theft of remains to sell them: other motivations and circumstances include pranks or amusement, allegedly Palo Maymbe practice involving human remains rituals, or aggressive collection and harvesting of donated or autopsy human tissues for medical research or commercial purposes.

References

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