

Human skeletons in schools

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resource

Many schools hold human skeletons and are wondering about the right thing to do with them. As English-medium schools listen more closely to the responses of their Māori students and parents, they start to ask if it is even ethical to have them. NZASE Science Communicator Mike Stone talks to experts about different perspectives and possible approaches.

History

Many skeletons in schools come from India (you may find a label saying so on the hip bone). From the mid-1800s until 1985 there was a somewhat shady, but legal, trade in human remains from India, largely supplying doctors and medical students.

They were sourced in ways that we would now consider unethical – from executed prisoners, unclaimed corpses and remains robbed from graves, according to Scott Carney’s description of the trade in his book [The red market](#).

European collection and theft of human remains from Aotearoa began with Captain Cook’s crew. Toi moko began to appear as an item of trade at about the time the whalers and sealers arrived in the early 1800s.

Some museum staff even excavated remains to fill requests from overseas, as well as their own display cases. There are stories suggesting kōiwi tangata Māori skeletal remains were also used in teaching.

Kawakawa leaves – garlands of these or other green leaves are often worn as a sign of mourning at a tangi or repatriation ceremony. Photo: Mike Stone.

Te ao Māori perspectives

Dr Ocean Mercier (Ngāti Porou) said in [a lecture on kōiwi tangata](#), “Kōiwi tangata are the physical embodiment of whakapapa ... kōiwi tangata are not just bones to Māori, because their connection to their tūpuna does not diminish with time.” So kōiwi are seen as a person, deserving of mana and dignity.

James Hēnare (Ngāpuhi) [said that nothing](#)

[is more tapu](#) than the realm of death, and it requires careful management by use of tikanga.

Dr Jamie Metzger (Ngāi Tahu) adds: “The ethic of kaitiakitanga, to care for something ancestrally important, and the act of manaa-kitanga, showing respect and generosity to others, means

that, regardless of where they are from, Māori will be a voice to provide and care for human remains that rest on their landscape. It’s an ancestrally mandated responsibility.”

Museums and returning kōiwi

While Aotearoa NZ has led the way in repatriating Māori and Moriori tūpuna held in overseas museums for 20 years, only since 2021 has Museums Aotearoa had a policy of returning ancestral remains to their descendant communities.

‘Tapu Tapu’ by Te Uira, 2022, used with the artist’s permission.



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Jamie Metzger at Te Papa Tongarewa.
Image © Nicola Welhelmsen.

At Te Papa, Jamie Metzger is responsible for the Ngākahu Domestic Repatriation Project, which provides funding and resources to those New Zealand museums for this work.

Museums here and globally now mostly accept that the ethical action is to repatriate human remains in their collections, and not to display them publicly. In Aotearoa NZ, we recognise the strong ongoing connection Māori have to their tūpuna and to the whenua, and the importance of restoring those relationships broken when ancestors were stolen from their burial sites.

This process of repatriation involves determining provenance. Visual inspection alone by a bio-archaeologist can provide information about gender, age at death (from bone and teeth development), height and ancestral affiliation (bone structure). Destructive analysis can also indicate diet (chemical signature in bones) and age of bones (carbon dating).

Human skeletons in schools

Schools are starting to reconsider their use of real human skeletons. A June 2023 poll by Mike Stone on the NZ Science teachers' Facebook page found that a majority of the 103 respondents no longer had a real skeleton at their school, and those who do are reconsidering their practices.

Many may feel that the way the bones were collected was not morally or ethically sound, and question whether we need to use real human remains in teaching, or

whether we can use replicas or images.

A first step is to determine if the bones are likely to be human. Look for weight (bone is heavier than plastic), tiny holes on bone surfaces (for blood vessels and nerves) and an Anatomical Specimen sticker.

If it looks like they could possibly be human, Jamie suggests these next steps:

- Stop using the human remains in teaching.
- Store them in a private, secure and clearly labelled dedicated space; eg, a lockable cabinet.
- Ensure that the school leadership knows where they are, and restrict access to them.
- Inform local hapū and iwi that you hold human remains onsite. They may have some advice on tikanga or appropriate storage.
- Try to establish a more certain provenance. Check school records for any documentation about the source of the skeleton. Ask current and former staff about when the skeleton came to the school. Engaging the expertise of a bio-anthropologist (from Auckland and Otago universities) may be helpful.

MoE on human skeletons

The September 2022 MoE leaders bulletin included an item about human skeletons, suggesting that schools seeking guidance contact their kaumātua, and if none were available, [their local MoE office](#).

The MoE agree with Jamie about stopping the use of real human skeletons and storing them in a safe place, as the practice is inappro-

A repatriation ceremony at Te Papa in 2018. Photo: US Embassy NZ, CC-by-2.0.



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appropriate and culturally unsafe for students. The MoE also believes it is important to be transparent, and to let parents and whānau know that there are human remains in the school.

Disposal options

Schools may take a number of different approaches.

If possible, work as a school community in partnership with mana whenua, and together decide how to proceed. *(Note: This is not a problem to dump in their lap, and requires school leader involvement.)*

This approach is appropriate even if the human remains are not Māori in origin. They may be willing, but not all iwi or hapū will have the capacity to help, as they may be stretched by other demands. This will require patience, and understanding on both sides that this is a very complex issue to navigate.

The [WD Trotter Anatomy Museum](#) at the Otago Medical School will take skeletons. Jamie makes two provisos: “Be aware that medical schools are also confronting the appropriateness of using human remains for teaching where no consent was given.”

“And ask what will happen to the skeleton you send, making sure this is something you feel comfortable with as a school community.”

Some schools have taken the skeleton for cremation and buried the ashes in the local cemetery. For a skeleton of Hindu origin this method is appropriate.

Schools considering having a ceremony with karakia to thank the remains for their service, and to invoke protection for them on the journey to their new home, would need find someone with the requisite skills to lead the ceremony.

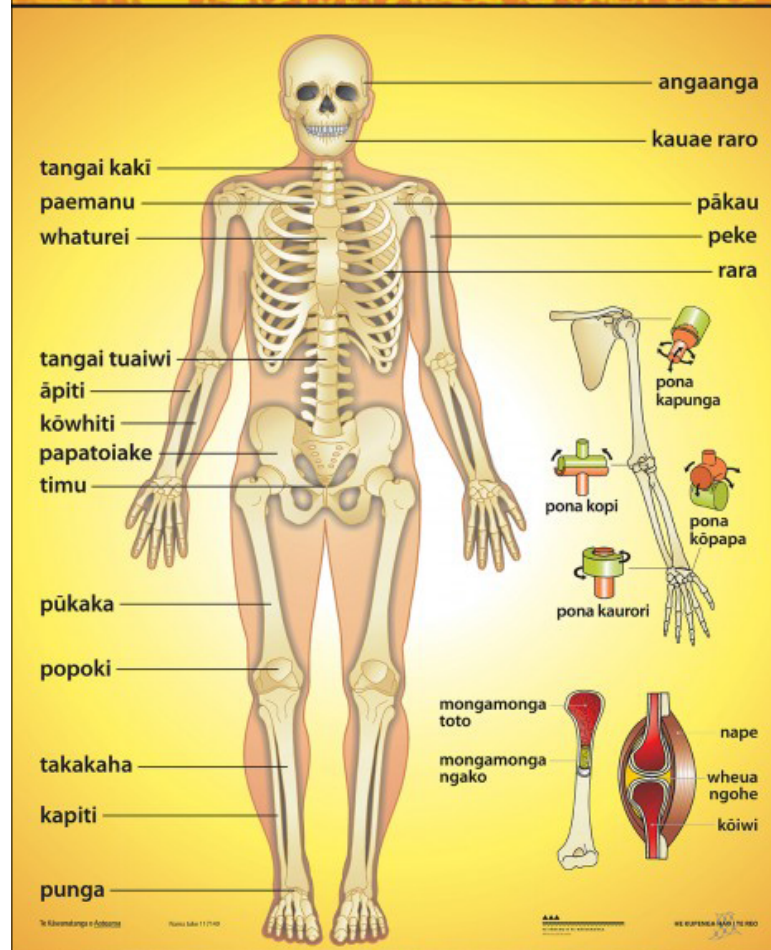
Sources of plastic skeletons

Dick Smith, [180cm anatomical model skeleton](#), \$587.

Factory Fast, [180cm anatomical model skeleton](#), \$511.

Etsy, [165cm model skeleton](#), \$391.

Careyou, [180cm medical model skeleton](#), \$262.



Ngā Kupu

Karakia – Ritual chant

Kōiwi tangata – Human bones; other remains (teeth, hair, nails)

Poroiwi – Skeleton, bone

Pūnaha kōiwi – Skeletal system

Rua kōiwi – Burial place of bones

Tapu – Sacred, restricted, set apart

Tikanga – Protocol, correct procedure

Toi moko – Tattooed preserved head

Tūpuna – Ancestors

Wāhi tapu – Sacred space, eg, for storing ancestral remains

Wai whakanoa – Water used to remove tapu from the body

Whakawātea – Protocol for removing tapu before and after contact with kōiwi tangata

Whenua – Land, territory; afterbirth.

From *Te Aka Māori Dictionary*
Te pūnaha kōiwi, by He Kupenga Hao i te Reo.



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