

The Body Snatchers

Charges of illegal sales of human remains tarnish a university—and lifesaving donor programs too

By **JEFFREY KLUGER**

LORI TILDEN WAS IN THE ROOM WHEN her sister Kim died of breast cancer in 1998. The loss was devastating, but Lori took some consolation from the fact that her sister, a mother of two, had lived long enough to bequeath her remains to the UCLA willed-body program, hoping that what researchers learned from her cadaver would help spare other children the pain of growing up without a mother.

A whole new kind of pain came last week, when Tilden learned of the arrest of Henry Reid, the director of the UCLA willed-body program, and Ernest Nelson, a former mortuary worker. Reid was arrested on suspicion of grand theft, and is thought to have illegally sold body parts for profit from some 500 cadavers in the UCLA cooler—

shadowy practice of body sales. New Orleans' Tulane University last week got caught up in the controversy when it was revealed that seven cadavers it gave a distributor had been blown up by the U.S. Army as part of a test of land mine-resistant footwear. Says Monique Coulon Nemeth, whose deceased father's body may have been among the remains: "It's so sad to do this to [families], so wrong."

Everyone involved in the UCLA scandal was pointing fingers at everyone else, with UCLA saying it had known nothing of what Nelson and Reid were up to and the families of the donors filing suit against the university. Much more troubling was the impact the case could have—not on bodies already gone but on ones still to be pledged by living donors, who may now wonder if their largesse is such a good idea. "There's nothing more toxic to public altruism than

ing and processing the body may collect a reasonable fee for expenses. Such a loose standard begs to be exploited—and it is.

A whole body might cost \$1,400, but a harvested heart valve may go for \$9,120, and knee cartilage for \$14,000. "[Tissue brokers] claim they're only recovering costs," says Arthur Dalley, director of the anatomical gift program at Vanderbilt University. "But if you were trying to build a human being by buying those parts, you'd find it very expensive."

That kind of questionable dealing may not only discourage donors from giving their bodies but may also keep them from donating organs and tissue, which are used for the far more pressing business of keeping other people alive. Those transplant programs are much more closely policed. Bob Rigney, CEO of the American Association of Tissue Banks, says donors to banks in his group sign informed-consent contracts that describe all possible uses for their tissue: "We explain everything a person might want to know. We even provide for follow-ups—a week, a month, a year later."

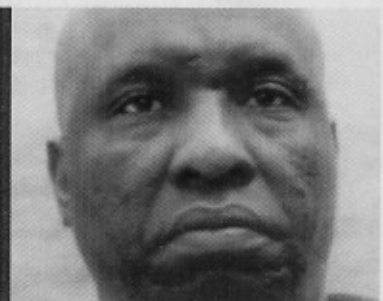
Even ostensibly legitimate programs may contain nasty surprises. Skin donated for use in lifesaving grafts has been known



GATEKEEPER
Henry Reid ran UCLA's willed-body program. He is suspected of profiting from sales of body parts from cadavers in the cooler



BODY TRADER
Ernest Nelson may have cut up as many as 500 bodies in six years, then transferred the parts to 100 labs or biotechnology companies



A HEART VALVE MIGHT GO FOR \$9,120; CARTILAGE MAY FETCH \$14,000

Kim's possibly among them—to Nelson, who was arrested on suspicion of receiving stolen property. Nelson, who used a power saw to dismember the bodies, says he paid \$700,000 for the parts and received fees to transfer them to research labs, including Mitek, a subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson. Nelson says he believed that the transactions were legitimate; Reid hasn't commented. UCLA came under suspicion as well, condemned by the families of donors for lax oversight, at best, or knowing about a lucrative tissue bazaar and winking at it, at worst. If someone profited from her sister's body, Tilden wants the money back. "I'll give it to cancer research," she says. "I don't want the money [for myself]. That's blood money."

The scandal threw a bright light on the

this kind of scam," says Art Caplan of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Bioethics. "Potential donors say, 'Exactly what I thought. They're stealing our parts.'"

If parts are being sold for profit, it's mostly because it's such an easy thing to do. Each year, up to 8,000 donors in the U.S. may leave their bodies to science, and while most people like to think of their mortal remains being gently dissected by respectful medical students, the fact is that cadavers might just as easily be sawed apart and scattered to pharmaceutical companies and biotech firms, or even used as flesh-and-blood crash-test dummies. The only hard rule, by federal law, is that under no circumstances may anyone profit from the transaction. The exception to that rule, however, is that the people handling, stor-

ing and processing the body may collect a reasonable fee for expenses. Such a loose standard begs to be exploited—and it is. Tissue banks that receive a family's consent to harvest heart valves could take marketable bones or tendons along with them if the agreement doesn't specifically forbid it.

Until the system is reformed, donors have ways to look out for themselves. Demanding that all uses for tissue be spelled out in a contract is one option. Researching reputable organizations and donating only to them is another. It will take a long time before a possible malefactor like UCLA wins its good reputation back. Until then, the school may serve as a cautionary tale—for other universities and donors alike. —Reported by David Bjerklie and Sora Song/New York, Noah Isackson/Chicago, Ruth Laney/Baton Rouge and Sean Scully/Los Angeles