

Full transcript - Interview with Matt Tinney

Manager

Gross Anatomy Lab, Body Donation Program

Courteney: I spoke to the director of UBC's Body Donation Program for a behind-the-scenes perspective on the process of becoming a donor.

Matt: My name is Matt Tinney, I am the manager of the Body Donation Program at UBC.

Courteney: What was your introduction to the Body Donation Program?

Matt: I first started with the program working as a technician back in 2014. Before that, I knew of the general idea of body donation, but then I saw the opportunity to join this team and be a part of something that I thought was so important, so valuable, I saw it as a real privilege to be a part of that kind of team. So, I joined as a technician and then a few years later became manager of the program.

Courteney: So you and your team are probably the first points of contact for somebody who might be reaching out, through email, or through a phone call, just to get information. What is the most common question you get asked?

Matt: Yes we do get a lot of different questions. For the most part, I find that people just want to really understand the process and how it works and make sure that everything is arranged, so that when the time comes, and they have passed away, their family can carry out their wishes, and it's smooth and straightforward and there are no surprises. So thinking ahead about what they want to do with their body and thinking ahead about what kind of position they're going to leave their loved ones in. So that's what we're here for. We're here to speak to the donors and then speak with their family members and their doctor and answer all those questions to help make sure that they know it is as simple and straightforward as possible.

Courteney: Respect and dignity are core values of this program. How do you see this in your day-to-day work?

Matt: The team members that I have working with me, that I'm very fortunate to work with, they joined the team really fully knowing the reality of the kind of work that we do, and the importance that that work has, and the impact that Body Donation has on medical education and training of medical professionals. Everyone on the team really understands the importance of the work that we do, and that each donor is such an invaluable gift. So one of the important decisions that we've made a conscious decision, for example, is that we have staff that is responsible for the entire process.

Courteney: Can you tell us what it is involved in the process?

Matt: Everything from speaking with donors on the phone, to assisting with registration, to processing a donation at the time of death. So speaking with the family members and the doctor and coordinating the transfer, as well as the technical duty. So receiving the body and preparing for embalming and dissection. So our staff handles all those responsibilities as it is important that that's the case, because they have that interaction from start to finish, so it keeps us daily reminded and humbled by the gift and the privilege that we have to be working with the donors' bodies.

My worry would be if that weren't the case, that if we had staff responsible for answering the phones and emails, and different staff responsible for handling the bodies, you would have that disconnect with the whole human side behind the donation. So that's something that we have. So the staff being responsible for all those different aspects of the body donation process, I think it is really important because, as you said, it makes sure that our respect and dignity are at the core of everything that we do here.

Courteney: Have your own views with respect to Body Donation changed over the years that you have been with the Program?

Matt: Yes I think in some ways, my views have evolved a bit. Of course, I always thought it was such an important and forward-thinking selfless thing that you can do, and we're so lucky that people choose to do this.

What I've learned over the years is that there really seems to be always another deeper layer involved. So I get to experience that most profoundly at each year when we have the memorial service. The students organize this amazing, beautiful, ceremony as a way of expressing their gratitude for the donors. Seeing the students speak and perform, and hearing the family members say some words about their loved ones, and reading the messages and seeing the photographs and the personal items on the memory wall, it is a really powerful reminder. And because of attending those memorials each year for several years, you learn that the impact of body donation goes so far beyond just the students and just the program. It is the families of the donors, and it goes beyond to the communities that those donors and their families come from. And then the training that the students are getting and becoming physicians, and they're giving back to their communities and it is just some of these ripples so much deeper. So that's what I'm realizing there's always another layer behind the impacts of body donation that really spreads much further than you realize.

Courteney: What would you really like people to know about this program?

Matt: I would like people to know that we're here for you. If it's something that you might consider for yourself, you think you might like to give back in that way, you probably have some questions about how that works, and what happens with your body, and I want people to be reassured. How the body is used, and how the program works, so if you or your loved ones have questions about how to sign up, how it works once you pass away, how does the body get to UBC, or what happens, we're here to answer all those questions. If that's something that you think you'd like to know more about, I hope that people will contact us.

Courteney: If you could sum up your experience with the program in one word, what would that word be?

Matt: I would say legacy. We have kind of talked about there is a very broad impact from a donor giving their body to the program. The donor is giving their body so others can learn and go on to affect the lives of thousands of people over decades, and that is an incredible legacy that leaves behind. And I was saying, I realize working with this program over the years just how deep that goes. It's an incredible legacy and the body program has been here for decades and decades, just thinking about the thousands of donors over the years, and the thousands thousands more, of family members and people in the community that has benefited from that, it is really an incredible legacy.

Courteney: Thank you so much for answering our questions and sharing your perspective on body donation. I hope we've given listeners something to think about. Thank you.

Matt: My pleasure, thanks for speaking with me today.