The ultimate donation that an individual can give is the gift of their whole body after death to advance anatomic education and clinical training of medical students, physicians and other medical personnel.

Voluntary whole body donations by generous individuals are relied upon as a resource to help physicians and other medical personnel complete their required learning, as they prepare themselves to provide for outstanding care for the living.

Registering with Our Program at Vanderbilt

The enrollment period for Vanderbilt’s Anatomical Donation Program extends throughout the year, and is open to anyone residing in Middle Tennessee who is 18 years or older, and of sound mind. The donor must sign the card themselves, along with two witnesses, indicating an intention to donate his/her whole body to Vanderbilt. We do not accept donations decided by the next of kin.

Please make an alternative plan. Certain conditions may exclude Vanderbilt from accepting your anatomical gift, since the circumstances that bring about death are rarely predictable. Exclusions include having a highly infectious disease such as MRSA, infectious hepatitis, tuberculosis or AIDS; advanced decomposition; extremes in weight; an unhealed wound from recent surgery or other trauma; and open bed sores. Vanderbilt cannot accept bodies that have been autopsied, embalmed or had organs removed for transplantation. In addition, due to the need for a timely transport after death, we are only able to transport from within the Middle Tennessee region.

If you wish to become a whole body donor, please contact our office or visit our website for donor registration forms. We encourage you to share this information with your relatives and let them know of your intent, gain their agreement and help them fulfill your wishes at the time of death. Donors must be registered with the program at least 30 days before death. We do not accept death bed enrollments.
Procedures at the Time of Death

The medical school should be notified as soon as possible after death has been pronounced by proper authorities. Personnel in the Anatomical Donations Program will confirm if the donor is medically acceptable and will arrange for transporting the body from within the middle Tennessee region to our facility. If, however, death occurs at home or at some considerable distance from the medical school, other options will be discussed with the family.

Services at the Time of Death

Unfortunately, it is not possible to have a funeral or hold a viewing for the donor at the time of death. Some families of donors find it comforting to hold a memorial service for the deceased, others plan to have a service held later when the cremains are returned. Some families announce the donation in the obituary and request that memorial gifts be directed toward the Program in Advanced Anatomy and Simulated Skills at Vanderbilt. Others prefer to remain anonymous donors.

What Will Happen to My Body?

The body will be embalmed and retained until it is used for training. Each body is treated with respect and dignity throughout the donation process, with instructors typically referring to your body as a “silent teaching partner.” Typical studies involve the practicing of skills and procedures, research, or learning of anatomy by medical students, physicians and other healthcare personnel.

After the learning/training experiences are completed, the body will be cremated. Our registration forms provide several options that allow you to make your wishes known about the final disposition of cremains. Cremated remains can eventually be returned to the family, cemetery or funeral home for a private burial or they can be picked up at Vanderbilt by a designated person. Cremains can also be buried in an annual memorial service, at a burial site owned by Vanderbilt and shared with Meharry Medical College. Family members are encouraged to attend these services. We feel a high level of dignity is maintained throughout the learning experiences with the bodies and during the final disposition of the cremains.

Alternative Plans

We highly recommend a person who donates his/her entire body have an alternative plan in the event the medical school cannot accept the body at the time of death. As previously mentioned, unforeseen medical circumstances could cause Vanderbilt to decline your generous gift. The development of an alternative plan will lessen the stress and confusion on your next of kin or executor at the time of death.

Frequently Asked Questions

How long will the body be retained by the medical school?
We will not make any firm promises. Expect Vanderbilt to retain the body from six months to three years, depending on the scheduling of educational courses and studies.

What happens to the body after the studies are completed?
Upon completion of the studies, each donor is cremated individually in accordance with Tennessee law. At the time of enrollment, you may indicate your wishes regarding the final disposition of your cremains. You may also wish to leave this option to your designated next of kin since circumstances may change from the time you enroll until the time of death.

Can I still donate to your school if I live in another state?
No, you must be a resident of the state of Tennessee. If you are enrolled in our program and move to another state we recommend you contact a medical school in the state where you reside, and notify us you no longer meet the criteria for our donor registry.

Can I cancel or revoke my donation if I change my mind?
Yes, you can cancel at any time by notifying the Vanderbilt Anatomical Donation Program of your decision. You do not have to give us a reason, and we will remove you from our registry. You should discuss your donation plans with your family, since Vanderbilt is unlikely to receive your donation if there are strong negative feelings from your next of kin who must notify us soon after your death.

Will I receive any compensation for my donation?
No. By law, medical schools are not allowed to give money or purchase a body for donation.

Are any costs involved in the donation of one’s body?
In special circumstances, donated bodies have been transported from outside the middle Tennessee region, and the estate or family is responsible for transportation costs. Such special circumstances are discussed and noted in advance. No other costs are involved for the donor or their family. We provide the following services free of charge for the donor and their family: transportation from the site of the donor’s death within middle Tennessee, specialized embalming procedures, maintenance, cremation and interment in our burial site or return of ashes to the designated person.

Will my family receive a report of medical findings or be given details of the study of the body?
We do not provide any reports concerning pathologic findings, the cause of death or specific details of the studies.

Should I have my caregivers, next of kin, or hospice contact the Anatomical Donations Program when death is imminent?
Once you are officially added to our registry, no additional contact is necessary until the time of your death when your next of kin call to notify us. However, many families find it reassuring and helpful to check on procedures when it becomes evident the end of life is near. We encourage such calls.