

Experts urge 18th-century 'Irish giant' be laid to rest

December 21 2011

Experts called Wednesday for the skeleton of Charles Byrne, the "Irish giant", to be removed from a London museum where it has been on display for almost 200 years and buried at sea, as he wanted.

Standing at seven feet seven inches tall (2.3 metres), Byrne was a celebrity in his own lifetime and when he died in 1783 at the age of 22, the renowned surgeon and anatomist John Hunter was keen to acquire his skeleton.

According to the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ), Byrne was terrified of becoming one of Hunter's specimens and wanted to be buried at sea.

But the surgeon managed to bribe one of the Irishman's friends and took his body before it could be laid to rest in the English Channel.

Hunter boiled Byrne's body down to a skeleton and it became a key feature of his anatomy collection. This was later displayed at the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons in London, where it remains today.

In the BMJ article, experts acknowledge the role the skeleton has played in research, including by helping to link acromegaly -- an unusual condition where someone produces too much growth hormone -- and the pituitary gland.

But Len Doyal, emeritus professor of medical ethics at Queen Mary

university in London, and Thomas Muinzer, a lawyer at Queen's University Belfast, say it is now time to grant Byrne's wish and give him a peaceful burial at sea.

"The fact is that Hunter knew of Byrne's terror of him and ignored his wishes for the disposal of his body. What has been done cannot be undone but it can be morally rectified," they wrote.

"Surely it is time to respect the memory and reputation of Byrne: the narrative of his life, including the circumstances surrounding his death."

They argue that Byrne's DNA has now been taken and can be used in further research, while his skeleton can be replaced by a fake for the purposes of public education.

"As a sign of respect for Byrne's original desires, his skeleton should be buried at sea as part of a ceremony commemorating his life," they write.

However, Hunterian Museum director Sam Alberti rejected the call, saying the value of the remains outweighed his apparent wishes.

"A vivid example of the value of having access to the skeleton is the current research into familial isolated pituitary adenoma (benign pituitary tumours that run in families)," he said.

"This genetically links Byrne to living communities, including individuals who have requested that the skeleton should remain on display in the museum.

"At the present time, the museum's trustees consider that the educational and research benefits merit retaining the remains."

(c) 2011 AFP

Citation: Experts urge 18th-century 'Irish giant' be laid to rest (2011, December 21) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-12-experts-urge-18th-century-irish-giant.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.