

Cadavers in Car Safety Research

In 1993, it was widely disclosed that research engineers at Heidelberg University in Germany had used 200 adult and child cadavers in simulated car crash tests. The researchers argued that the use of human cadavers was necessary to study the actual effects of these crashes on the body. They insisted that the research would save lives because it would help engineers design safer cars.

There was significant public outcry against this practice from numerous groups. The ADAC, Germany's largest automobile club, issued a statement challenging the research on ethical grounds: "In an age when experiments on animals are being put into question, such tests must be carried out on dummies and not on children's cadavers." Rudolph Hammerschmidt, spokesman for the Roman Catholic German Bishops' Conference similarly decried the practice, arguing, "Even the dead possess human dignity...this research should be done with manikins." Political leaders also weighed in on the debate. Klaus von Trotha, research minister of Baden-Wuerttemberg state, questioned the study: "Our constitution guarantees freedom in scientific research. But the constitution also guarantees the protection of human dignity."

The university defended its research by pointing to the results. Dr. Rainer Mattern, the head of Heidelberg University's forensic pathology department, responded to public reaction against the use of child cadavers, arguing, "The tests have saved lives of other children."

When it was revealed that similar tests were being conducted in the United States at Wayne State University, some U.S. officials offered their support. George Parker, the associate administrator for research at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration argued, "We need that type of data to find out how people are injured in crashes to know what areas of the body are injured under what conditions." He added that human subjects were necessary to determine the validity of the data gathered from crash test dummies: "If you didn't do this testing, you wouldn't know what limits to put on dummies for crash tests."

For many, the debate ultimately hinged on whether the research yielded information not attainable from crash dummies and whether or not the families gave their consent to the use of the cadavers.



Discussion Questions:

1. According to those opposing the research, what harm is done by conducting crash tests with cadavers? According to researchers, what is the harm done by not doing the research?
2. Who are the moral agents involved in this case? Who are the subjects of moral worth? Explain your reasoning.
3. Do you think the idea of human dignity applies equally to the living and the dead? Why or why not?
4. To what degree should family members have full capacity to make decisions or give consent on behalf of their deceased relatives? To what degree should other considerations, such as communal values or legal restrictions, be taken into account?
5. How does research using cadavers compare to organ donation? Do you think one is more ethically permissible than the other? Explain your reasoning.
6. How does animal testing compare to this case?

Resources:

German University Said to Use Corpses in Auto Crash Tests

<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/24/world/german-university-said-to-use-corpses-in-auto-crash-tests.html>

German University Must Prove Families OK'd Tests on Cadavers

<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/322514/GERMAN-UNIVERSITY-MUST-PROVE-FAMILIES-OKD-TESTS-ON-CADAVERS.html?pg=all>

Auto Safety Crash Testing Ignites Furor: Germany: The program uses human bodies. U.S. tests using cadavers at 3 universities are disclosed.

http://articles.latimes.com/1993-11-25/news/mn-60691_1_safety-tests

University Promises to Prove it Had Relatives' OK to Use Bodies

<http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1993/University-Promises-To-Prove-It-Had-Relatives-OK-To-Use-Bodies/id-fe2ecda0c83ffada0d56c232b3a9433b>

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