

## Maori remains make the long journey to their ancestral home

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A collection of Maori skeletal remains and a tattooed Maori head discovered at the University of Birmingham were handed back to New Zealand in a spiritual ceremony on Friday.

The toi moko (preserved head) and kōiwi tangata (skeletal remains) were uncovered by staff in the anatomy department at the University's College of Medical and Dental Sciences – but how they arrived at the University or even in the UK is shrouded in mystery. They have never been used or displayed by the University and have remained in storage for many years.

A delegation from the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa from Wellington visited the University this week and held a repatriation ceremony on Friday (18 October) where the remains were given back to the Maori people.

**[Dr June Jones](/staff/profiles/haps/PrimaryCareClinicalSciences/jones-june.aspx)** (Religious and Cultural lead for the College of Medical and Dental Sciences at the University of Birmingham) said: "We have no records about how these items came to be in storage at the University, but when they were uncovered, we knew we had to give them back. We believe that to keep them would be wrong. They belong back with their own people, to be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve"

Dr Jones has worked tirelessly to establish where the remains, as well as some which she returned to Native Americans in California last year, originated from and was delighted to be able to contact Te Papa to offer the remains to them.

She said: "I am now delighted to be able to welcome the Maori delegation. I have been working with Te Papa for nearly three years and I am so pleased to be able to hand them back to the people who will take them to where they belong. It was a huge honour to welcome Maori Elders and members of the Museum Repatriation team to the University of Birmingham."

The ceremony – a form of tangihanga, or funeral - began when the ancestral remains were carried into the Senate Chamber in enclosed boxes. Maori greetings with a conch trumpet and call of welcome from one of the Maori elders followed, and then prayers. Both University of Birmingham and Te Papa representatives spoke before a traditional song and the signing of the transfer document.

Once the toi moko and kōiwi tangata arrive back in Wellington, a ceremonial welcome will take place with the local Maori community before researchers begin to ascertain their place of origin to return them to their original homeland. Until then, the museum will care for and house the ancestral remains in private in a guardianship role.

Dr Jones added: "Although the Maori delegation will depart from the University on Friday afternoon, our collaboration will continue. I will continue to work with Te Papa to help identify other medical schools and institutions in the UK which may have Maori human remains. Whilst there are controversies surrounding repatriation, once the benefits for both sides are understood, many medical schools might be only too willing to undertake repatriation work with our assistance."

Arapata Hakiwai, Kaihautū at the Te Papa Museum, a role which is similar to the Maori chief executive, said: "We thank the University of Birmingham very much for proactively engaging with us, and we are so pleased to be here today to be able to take our ancestors home.

"We will continue our work in New Zealand to establish which part of our country they originate from."

### Notes to editors

Footage and photos of the ceremony are available from the University of Birmingham press office.

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