

Repatriating sacred Maori remains to New Zealand



The Medical School finds itself holding a collection of ancient human skulls and bone fragments from many places around the world. The records relating to how the collection was formed are either not available or incomplete, so little is known about the origin of the items. Our collection is not on display, and is not used for teaching or research. We decided to contact First Nation groups from our collection to offer the return of their ancestral remains.

There are a variety of opinions about repatriation. Museums are often keen to keep collections intact to allow education and further research to take place. This informs our understanding of how early cultures developed and functioned. From a native perspective, it is often vital to have ancestral remains repatriated to allow the ancestors to rest in peace. Knowing that ancestors are kept as museum items is deeply traumatic and in their eyes a mark of disrespect. Believing that repatriation was the only ethical response to our discovery, a decision was made to attempt repatriation of any of the remains which had good provenance. I took the Californian collection for repatriation in May 2012.

I am now delighted that we are preparing to welcome a Maori delegation from New Zealand Museum Te Papa on 17 and 18 October, with a formal handover ceremony in the Senate Chamber on Friday 18 October. I have been working with Te Papa for nearly three years and I am so excited that the ceremony is nearly here. It will be such a huge honour to welcome Maori Elders and members of the Museum Repatriation team to the University of Birmingham.

During their visit they are giving two seminars, which we are looking forward to. First, on Thursday afternoon in the Medical School, they will explain the importance of repatriation from their perspectives, using a case study of an earlier European repatriation to illustrate how Maori skulls were taken from New Zealand to become part of European collections. This will be a very moving seminar as we are largely ignorant of our Imperial history which led to such actions being common place. We will then move from the Medical School to the newly opened Bramall Music building, where they will give a demonstration of Maori music and song. Here, they will explain the role music and chant plays in welcoming back ancestors who have been away from their homeland for several hundred years.

Friday morning will be a very solemn day. The handover ceremony acts as a kind of funeral for the ancestors, and showing them the utmost respect is central to the ceremony. The ancestral remains will be carried into the room; there will be music and chanting to welcome them, and speeches from University and New Zealand delegates. The ceremony finishes with formal signing of the transfer documents. We are looking forward to welcoming the High Commissioner of New Zealand to the ceremony.

Although the Maori delegation will depart from the University on Friday afternoon, our collaboration will continue. Once the ancestral remains return home extensive research will continue to try to locate their precise homeland and a suitable place for reburial located. Until that time, they will be held in a special area of the Museum Repatriation centre, where they will be stored respectfully in private. 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.