

What should happen to your brain after you die?

Edinburgh International Science Festival
Royal College of Surgeons
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Facilitated Discussions Summary

- While there was strong support for brain research generally, many of the groups appeared to be ambivalent about donating their own brains for research. This was identified in one group as being an emotional, rather than intellectual, position and hard to explain. Further discussion explored links between this ambivalence and issues of what it means to be human and the spiritual dimension to this.
- Most groups discussed issues around commodification, in particular payment for donations or selling them on to commercial companies. This issue came up and was discussed in plenary as well. Some participants felt that brain tissue for healthcare research should not be commercialised and endorsed a not-for-profit model of drug development, while others felt very strongly that commercial companies should be allowed access to and make a profit from donated brain tissue. Participants in one group voiced the opinion that it was “unethical” for companies to use brain samples for financial gain, but could not see an alternative, given the current model of commercial drug development.
- Two groups discussed licensing brain banks. While there was general support in one group, the other group was of the opinion that whether Scottish Brain Banks should be responsible to an authority like the HTA would depend on how well the system is functioning now and the scale of brain donation in the future.
- Several groups raised questions about whether the infrastructure is in place to handle an increase in brain donations through a successful publicity campaign, and what happens if supply exceeds demand.
- One group discussed whether the mind survives and is separate to the brain or whether it is the same as any other organ.
- Two groups identified the potential practical conflict between organ donation for transplantation and brain donation for research, especially the logistics of donating both for transplantation and research given the rapid turn-around required for transplant organs.

- One group expressed discomfort about certain kinds of information (eg. criminal records) being accessed and linked to donated brain tissue, but acknowledged that research could end up being quite reductionist if broader social and environmental information is not allowed.
- There was ambivalence about feedback to individuals, including the relatives of donors, on research findings. Two groups expressed the view that general feedback would be welcomed, but not specific feedback. This related to concerns around data security, anonymisation and amount of administration involved. Another group, however, felt that research results should be made available to relatives, or should at least be an option.