

BOOK REVIEW

Insider Trading: How Mortuaries, Medicine and Money Have Built a Global Market in Human Cadaver Parts, by Naomi Pfeffer

Hardback, 376 pages
Yale University Press
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Insider Trading is a social history of the utilisation of and trade in human biological material for health-related purposes. The author takes an approach informed by social theory and produces an immensely readable set of narratives with moral implications for today's society.

Pfeffer concentrates on what she calls "stuff" in preference to "organs", including blood, corneas from the eye and even skin, largely taken from the dead. She unpacks the commodification of stuff for the health and even the beauty market. Her book makes for uncomfortable but compelling reading. Whilst biological material harvested from the human corpse for the health industry is the main theme, her account by necessity meanders at times to encompass blood transfusion.

The approach Pfeffer takes uses the lens of "cultural work" – social activity that takes place in the court of public opinion – to examine phenomena such as "corpse philanthropy", i.e. generosity with one's own body after death. She outlines "feeling" rules applied in this cultural work. Firstly, the corpse is referred to as a shell with the person no longer occupying it. Secondly, a utilitarian calculus is adopted: one deceased person's eyes can give sight to two people who have lost theirs. This calculus is made less brutal by inclusion of the donor's agreement. Finally, "visceral" repugnance must be kept in check: for example, the removal of the corpse's eyes is romanticised or abstracted as "the gift of sight". Cultural work is, in many ways, the explicit marketing of corpse philanthropy.

Pfeffer does not shy from considering how the explicitly commercial harvesting and sale of human stuff developed. Her narrative includes US court cases that established human blood for transfusion was a saleable commodity and hence subject to competition laws so hospitals could not boycott commercial vendors. Their blood had to come with a warranty of fitness and those who contracted post-transfusion hepatitis were entitled to sue for punitive damages. It is a little frightening to consider that the American Medical Association proposed a solution to this "problem": if the cost of blood was bundled into the cost of treatment, actions might only take the form of negligence suits, and thus not incur the same punitive damages. Pfeffer's comment that such legal machinations "sacrificed patients' health on the free market's altar" does not appear overstated.

This account of the market in human biological tissue will be of special interest to historians, ethicists and, dare I say, economists and policymakers. It is clear and readable and will appeal to the wider readership with an interest in the history of science. It is a compelling, but also embarrassing and sometimes appalling, account of profit often put before public good.

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