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## A lasting legacy: Body-donor program helps MERI train doctors in new techniques

By Richard J. Alley

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The next time you or a loved one is to undergo surgery, consider that the performing physician may have been trained on that procedure or the procedure itself may have been developed right in the heart of Midtown Memphis.

Located near Union Avenue and Cleveland, the Medical Education & Research Institute — MERI — is conducting hands-on teaching and training for physicians who travel to Memphis from across the country and around the world. At the forefront of this education is the use of cadavers donated through the Genesis Donor Program for the express purpose of furthering medical know-how.

"Our mission is to impact patient safety and ensure that physicians have a way to learn the new procedures," said Diana Kelly, manager of institutional development at MERI. "They are able to come here and practice on an uninvolved cadaver before they work on us. That's a much-preferred method."

The old adage "practice makes perfect" applies to sports and the arts, but possibly no place is it more apropos than in the medical field with those who take our lives in their hands on a daily basis.

"These techniques and improvements are coming at us very quickly, and there's constantly a new and better way to do a surgical practice, so that's where we come into play," Kelly said.

MERI is a nonprofit, state-of-the-art facility begun 15 years ago through the inspiration of Dr. Kevin Foley and as a joint venture of Baptist Memorial Healthcare Corp., Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare Corp. and Semmes-Murphey Neurologic and Spine Institute.

Foley's last duty assignment for the Army was as chief of neurosurgery at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, running the training program there, and attending at the military's medical school in Bethesda, Md. He was training military physicians in battlefield injuries, including management of spinal fractures. This was training for postgraduate physicians, those who, depending on specialty, may have been in

medical school for a decade by then.

"To train a surgeon how to do a new procedure, you either have to let that surgeon practice that procedure on a living human being, or simply have that surgeon watch you and trust that that surgeon, having watched you, will be able to go and carry out that procedure," Foley said.

He was able to train surgeons on fresh-frozen human cadavers in the freshman anatomy lab of the Uniformed Services University for the Health Sciences in Bethesda during the summer when the medical students were out of session. He became enamored with the idea that health care professionals needed to have these opportunities available year-round and in the civilian world as well.

"I decided to pursue setting up a center that could replicate that experience," he said.

He was invited to Memphis by Dr. James Robertson, then-chief of neurosurgery at the University of Tennessee, to give grand rounds and, though he had offers from UCLA — where he had trained — the University of Texas in Dallas and New York City, he came here and "was pleasantly surprised" by what he saw.

Foley gathered the participating organizations together -- each institution provides four board members — and what was created in a building that once housed a post office in the medical district became what Kelly calls "a very well-kept secret in Memphis." It is, however, the largest training facility of its kind in the world.

MERI makes use of the most up-to-date technology with high-fidelity human patient simulators and software programs that allow customizable medical emergencies to test various life-saving procedures. MERI was recently designated by the Tennessee state legislature and Gov. Phil Bredesen as a Simulation Center of Excellence.

However, the success of MERI, as agreed-upon by everyone involved, is with the donated cadavers, the teaching tools that allow the surgeons to further their knowledge of the human body and how it reacts to the rigors of surgery.

"Without our body-donation program and the generosity of our donors, and the gift that they give to us," Kelly said, "we would not be able to do the training and provide the benefit to the community."

At the time of death, the donor is brought to MERI, which takes care of all death certificates and expenses. Anatomic donors are not embalmed, giving the most lifelike training experience and the closest you can get to a live patient. After serology testing for AIDS, hepatitis and tuberculosis, among other diseases, donors are frozen and kept at minus-4 degrees, which preserves the tissue.

The donors stay there for about six to nine months, after which time MERI will notify the families that their loved one's stay is coming to an end, cremate the body and

return the ashes to the families or inter them in a mausoleum here in Memphis. If the family members ever change their minds, MERI will retrieve the ashes for them.

"We try to make it as easy on the families as possible," Kelly said. "We also write a letter back to the families and let them know all of the great training their loved one participated in — maybe they trained 200 paramedics or maybe they trained a physician on a new technique — so a lot of them can personalize it and have had surgery that their loved one helped train."

Last year, MERI received more than 660 donors into the program from all over the United States, most coming from nearby, regional states. The institution gets the word out about the program via its website and by working through hospices, but mostly through word of mouth.

"We have families that have had a loved one here and they tell their friends," Kelly said. "Each year we honor our donors from the previous year and invite the families here. We express to the families our thanks and what a great gift that was to the community."

The event acts as closure for these donors' families who have not had the benefit of a funeral, and physicians attend to tell how appreciative they are and what a great gift it was for their family member to be able to help teach them.

"The one thing that really makes us unique is that we have great community support," Kelly said. "We collaborate with local hospitals, we collaborate with local paramedic groups, EMTs and nursing schools to try to provide what we can."

The team working with families through the Genesis Donor Program become "almost like grief counselors" with their bond to these families. They keep in touch with the families for years in some instances.

"What we find is that a lot of the family members will then donate their body to the program because they see the benefit; they appreciate that we're very respectful to the donors," Kelly said.

"We hope that we are a very good alternative for a lot of people who really want to do one final thing to help their fellow man through our Genesis program," said Elizabeth Ostric, executive director of MERI. "It's really quite amazing when you realize that the lives of people all throughout the United States, and throughout the world, are possibly impacted by each donor because they take the time and give that gift so that care will be better."

### **Genesis Donor Program**

More information about the donor program is available at [genesislegacy.org](http://www.genesislegacy.org). Call

278-7841 or (877) 288-4483; or e-mail [genesis@meri.org](mailto:genesis@meri.org).



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