Vår ref.: 2015/29  Deres ref  Dato: 17.03.2015


In February 2015, The National Committee for Research Ethics on Human Remains received a request from Rose Drew, part-time Lecturer in Archaeology at University of Winchester, UK, concerning her project “Tukthuset. A study of crime and punishment, evidence of early anatomical investigations, and the human cost of poverty”. According to the application, the “project aims to give a ‘voice’ to the nameless dead buried at Tukthuset, describing patterns of health, disease and activity that have altered their bones, to thereby add to our knowledge of Oslo’s social history.”

The applicant has previously (between May 2009 and September 2010) conducted a preliminary examination of the human remains from Tukthuset, which are currently stored at Rikshospitalet in 122 boxes and consist of a mix of complete skeletons and commingled elements. According to the form (Point 11), the applicant “has obtained written permission from Professor Per Holck to continue my analyses on the Tukthuset remains.”

Concerning the actual approach, “All analysis will be non-destructive, based on gross inspection, and would consist on digital photographs, and records of observations and metric data capture.” Further, “The skeletal materials would not be removed or damaged, and would be left in Rikshospitalet.” The applicant plans to visit the collection several times during the spring 2015, and she will also be joined by a colleague, Dr. Gwyn Madden of Green Valley State University, who will assist her in the examinations.
The material is not previously researched in detail, and the Committee considers it positive in itself that this project will contribute with new knowledge about the collection. Also, the practical work of sorting out labelling the material is much appreciated, as it both will increase our knowledge and improve the storage and maintenance of the material. The applicant has given a balanced review of the ethical issues involved in the study. She points out that there are no identifiable descendants for these remains, that the research will not be destructive to the remains, that the material’s origins is well documented and ethically unproblematic, and that respect for the studied group, the poor and powerless inhabitants of Tukthuset, is part of the rationale behind the project. The Committee has no major comments concerning research ethics.

However, the Committee would like to emphasize a few point, which could be further elaborated and clarified in the project:

- It is a pre-condition that the institutional arrangements are sufficiently formalized. The Committee presupposes that Professor Holck, as a collaborative partner, will be responsible for the formal arrangements with Rikshospitalet and other relevant institutions in Norway.

- According to the request, “[A]ge and sex estimates will be based on standard textbooks and accepted techniques, and a wide range of literature on paleopathology will be consulted.” The Committee will add that a rich tradition of research also exists on the social history of Norway, which could also be consulted (albeit mostly in Norwegian) to broaden the understanding of the social and cultural context of Tukthuset in the relevant historical period.

- As for the results, it is stated that Dr. Drew’s “reports and journal articles will be provided to University of Oslo and the curator.” The Committee presupposes this will also be the case with the publications by Dr. Madden.

With regards,

Anne Karin Hufthammer (e.f.)
The National Committee for Research Ethics on Human Remains

Vidar Enebakk
Director, The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities