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USE SCIENCE TO BRING THE ANCESTORS HOME: DJAARA CEO

A scientific method used by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) could be used to return Aboriginal Ancestral remains to country they were stolen from, according to Rodney Carter, CEO of the Dja Dja Wurrung Group.

Mr Carter presented a paper, 'Bringing the Ancestors home: informed consent', for the American Anthropological Association Commission for the Ethical Treatment of Indigenous Human Remains Listening Session yesterday at the University of Queensland.

The paper outlined how isotope analysis – a method used by the ADF to repatriate fallen soldiers – could be used to determine the likely origin of Ancestral remains when no alternative evidence of geographic origins is available.

"More than 12,000 cases of Aboriginal Ancestral remains are estimated to be held by state institutions in Australia. This does not include those held in private collections and by international institutions," Mr Carter said.

"The spirits of these Ancestors are trapped and displaced from their mother countries. Aboriginal communities have stated their aspiration to return their Ancestors to the countries from which they were stolen.

"Often, however, this aspiration can be thwarted by a lack of documentary evidence to establish the community of origin of Ancestral remains held by institutions.

"The science is there," said Mr Carter.

His paper explains a project to develop a multi-proxy isotopic and genomic map across Victoria, which could assign provenance to Ancestral remains.

Mr Carter described analysing a sample of Ancestral remains as a process similar to performing a biopsy on a living person, for example, to diagnose or treat an illness – a process that requires informed consent.

"If we are providing informed consent to a medical procedure to save our child or partner, we are faced with understanding what recommended procedures we could agree to, or of course we could agree to no treatment," Mr Carter said.

"In the case of my Ancestor, I am the next of kin, the substitute decision maker, and my Ancestor did not consent to an initial treatment. I feel obligated to authorise a subsequent treatment to make them well again.

Acknowledging that some might regard a biopsy on Ancestral remains as too intrusive, Mr Carter said: "In today's society, we seek many medical intrusions for our own health. This care should be extended to our Ancestors, who do not have their own voice to say, 'Enough is enough, take me home'."

The paper also suggested laser ablation as an alternative technique, the impact of which is “not distinguishable to the naked eye”.

“Our own collective voices must be applied to the needs of all our Ancestors, who never chose the boxes they occupy. They never gave consent and, if I am to be benefited from sciences in any form, I should not deny my Ancestors the same benefits to heal them, to let them go back to Country,” Mr Carter said.

The American Anthropological Association Commission for the Ethical Treatment of Indigenous Human Remains Listening Session is being held at the University of Queensland this week.

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