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**Standard for Determination of Medicolegal Significance  
from Skeletal Remains in Forensic Anthropology**



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## Standard for Determination of Medicolegal Significance from Skeletal Remains in Forensic Anthropology

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## Foreword

The Anthropology subcommittee of the Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) under the guidance of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) recognizes the determination of medicolegal significance as an important first step in analyzing remains. Using the document initially published by the Scientific Working Group of Forensic Anthropology (SWGANTH), the subcommittee has reformatted the best practice guideline into a standard following the American Standards Board requirements. This document is intended to assist forensic anthropologists when assessing medicolegal significance from suspected skeletal material.

This document was revised, prepared, and finalized as a standard by the Anthropology Consensus Body of the AAFS Standards Board. The draft of this standard was developed by the Anthropology Subcommittee of the Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) for Forensic Science.

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**Keywords:** *Forensic Anthropology, medicolegal significance, nonhuman.*

**Table of Contents**

1 Scope.....1

2 Normative References .....1

3 Terms and Definitions .....1

4 Requirements .....1

4.1 General .....1

4.2 Procedure.....1

4.3 Considerations.....2

4.4 Reporting .....3

# Standard for Determination of Medicolegal Significance from Skeletal Remains in Forensic Anthropology

## 1 Scope

This standard sets procedures required for the determination of medicolegal significance from suspected skeletal remains. It addresses methodological, testing, and observational procedures for identifying skeletal remains as either human or nonhuman in origin and sets required procedures to assess the relevancy of human remains to the medicolegal death investigation system.

## 2 Normative References

There are no normative references.

## 3 Terms and Definitions

For purposes of this document, the following definitions apply.

### 3.1

#### **medicolegal significance**

Relevant to the medicolegal death investigation system; anthropologically, this term typically refers to human skeletal material of recent origin.

### 3.2

#### **skeletal material**

Osseous, cartilaginous, and dental tissues.

## 4 Requirements

### 4.1 General

Establishing medicolegal significance involves interpretation of available lines of evidence (e.g., morphology, context, and taphonomy) and professional judgment. The choice of analytical method shall be based on the condition/degree of preservation of the specimen.

### 4.2 Procedure

#### 4.2.1 Skeletal vs. Non-skeletal

Practitioners shall differentiate between skeletal and non-skeletal material using gross morphology and/or other applicable laboratory analyses (e.g., microscopic or elemental analysis).

Acceptable classifications are as follows.

- Skeletal: matches known characteristics of skeletal material to the exclusion of other reasonable possibilities.
- Consistent with skeletal: exhibits characteristics similar to skeletal material.
- Not skeletal: does not exhibit characteristics of skeletal material.

— Inconclusive: Lacks sufficient characteristics to make a determination.

#### **4.2.2 Human vs. Nonhuman**

Practitioners shall differentiate between human and nonhuman skeletal material using gross, histological, and/or biochemical analyses.

Acceptable classifications are as follows.

- Human: matches known characteristics of human skeletal material to the exclusion of other reasonable possibilities.
- Consistent with human: exhibits characteristics similar to human skeletal material.
- Nonhuman: does not exhibit characteristics of human skeletal material.
- Inconclusive: Lacks sufficient characteristics to make a determination.

#### **4.2.3 Determination of Medicolegal Significance of Human Material**

Human material shall be classified as having medicolegal significance based on skeletal modifications, contextual indicators, and/or taphonomic signatures.

Acceptable classifications are as follows.

- Medicolegally significant: skeletal modifications (e.g., recent dental work or surgical intervention), contextual indicators, and/or taphonomic signatures that are indicative of medicolegal significance to the exclusion of other reasonable possibilities.
- Cannot exclude as medicolegally significant: insufficient information to make a definitive determination of medicolegal significance but cannot exclude.
- Not medicolegally significant: skeletal modifications, contextual indicators (e.g., coffin hardware), or taphonomic signatures indicative of non-medicolegal significance.
- Inconclusive: insufficient information for any conclusion.

### **4.3 Considerations**

**4.3.1** Human or nonhuman skeletal material may still have legal significance (e.g., historical or archaeological human remains, or poached nonhuman remains) even in the absence of medicolegal significance.

**4.3.2** While assessing medicolegal significance, potentially confounding factors may include anomalous and pathological conditions.

**4.3.3** Differentiating skeletal from non-skeletal or human from nonhuman material based on a photographic review, as opposed to a physical examination of the actual remains, may be acceptable.

#### **4.4 Reporting**

The content of the written report (if required) should include a summary of the observations and comparative findings used to form an opinion regarding medicolegal significance. The supporting documentation for the report shall allow for independent evaluation of the conclusions. Documentation of observations may include a written description and, when available, supporting images (e.g., photographic, radiographic, sketches, and/or diagrams).



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