



Pathology Biology Section – 2003

G16 Media Relations and the Identification of the September 11 Pentagon Terrorist Attack Victims: The Perspective of the Office of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner

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The goals of this presentation are to review challenges faced by the Armed Forces Medical Examiners in effectively responding to the international news media following the September 11 Pentagon terrorist attack; and to provide guidance to medical examiner offices when dealing with intensive media interest following mass fatality incidents.

The September 11 terrorist attack at the Pentagon posed new challenges to the Office of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner (OAFME) in responding to intensive, international media interest. This response included extensive message development coordination between OAFME's spokesperson and other Department of Defense officials; creation of a "virtual" Joint Information Center (JIC) to communicate findings; and detailed attention towards delivering the appropriate message on the status of identifications while remaining sensitive to the needs of the victims' families.

In the chaotic hours immediately following the attack, the OAFME spokesperson notified DoD public affairs officials of his availability to respond to media inquiries; provided 24-hour pager/home telephone information; and prepared background papers about OAFME's role in the investigation. This information proved essential in helping to refer media inquiries rapidly to OAFME for reply.

The spokesperson completed this preparatory phase with jurisdictional issues over custody of the remains still unresolved between OAFME and the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of Virginia in the first 24 hours following the attack. Media inquiries began in earnest on September 12, when a reporter from The Washington Post called seeking an explanation and clarification of the situation. The resulting September 13 article ("Recovery Continues and Scientists Wait for Bodies") portrayed OAFME as prepared to act, but by that time the victim identification operation had commenced in Dover.

Communications with the media commenced in earnest two days after the attack. The JIC enabled OAFME to exchange information and coordinate appropriate responses with Dover AFB and DoD officials. U.S. Air Force casualty affairs officials held a short briefing when the remains arrived at the mortuary; however, OAFME officials did not participate, and at no point during the operation did OAFME conduct a press briefing. Instead, OAFME's spokesperson represented the chief medical examiner to the media and provided timely and accurate commentary over the next two weeks regarding the status of the operation. He referred journalists to former OAFME chiefs for expert analysis, and focused media attention on the work being conducted at the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL).

Over the next two weeks approximately two dozen international print and electronic media representatives conducted interviews with the OAFME spokesperson or AFDIL staff, including CNN, National Public Radio, The News Hour with Jim Lehrer, the Associated Press and The Times of London. AFDIL staff also received positive coverage for their work providing DNA identifications of the United Airlines Flight 93 crash victims in Somerset County, Pa. DoD officials provided daily updates regarding the number of identified victims and the return of remains to family members.

From late September until early November 2001, media interest lessened and focused almost entirely on the identification and disposition of the terrorists' remains. At the close of the investigation in November 2001, OAFME's spokesperson participated in a joint DoD planning session for release of information to the families. He also developed background papers for DoD officials on the complexity of the identification process and served as a contact point for questions from next-of-kin and interested media. DoD did not formally release information about the close of the investigation; however, The Washington Post on November 21 covered the story under the headline "Remains Unidentified for 5 Pentagon Victims; Bodies Were Too Badly Burned, Officials Say."

In conclusion, OAFME achieved generally positive and timely coverage for its work following the attacks. Multiple requests for information were handled simultaneously, and AFIP experts were utilized for comment as needed. Future OAFME communications following mass casualty incidents could benefit from the posting of background information on the AFIP website, and from an initial press briefing by OAFME personnel, subject to DoD guidance and approval. OAFME experience in this and other mass fatality incidents reflects the importance of appointing a single spokesperson, developing and releasing messages in a joint setting with other investigating agencies, and utilizing selected experts for public commentary as needed.

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