



Physical Anthropology Section – 2003

H48 Presenting Forensic Anthropology Training Seminars and Workshops to Forensic Science, Medico-Legal, and Law Enforcement Professionals: Consequences for Death Investigations Involving Decomposed, Skeletal, and Burned Human Remains

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The goals of this presentation are to encourage and engage those attending to consider and discuss the benefits and consequences of providing training seminars and workshops in Forensic Anthropology to medico-legal, forensic science, law enforcement, and legal professionals.

This presentation will discuss the content and target participants of Forensic Anthropology workshops presented to various medico-legal, forensic science, and law-enforcement agencies. These lectures and training workshops have had both positive and negative effects on the investigation and litigation of cases involving skeletal, burned, and decomposed human remains.

Training seminars and workshops in Forensic Anthropology are a relatively recent occurrence in Minnesota. This is largely due to the infrequent and informal nature of local forensic anthropological consultation on cases involving skeletal, burned, and decomposed remains before 1991, as well as a lack of awareness by local medico-legal, law enforcement, and legal professionals of exactly what a forensic anthropologist could contribute to a death investigation. Prior to 1991, the few cases that were perceived to warrant the expertise of a forensic anthropologist were sent to the Smithsonian Institution or to other anthropologists outside of the state. Since 1991, the author has been invited to participate in an ever-increasing number of seminars centering on death investigation and the different areas of expertise relevant to such investigations. These presentations have resulted in an increased and more widespread awareness by state, city, and county law enforcement, forensic science, and medicolegal agencies of the significant contributions by anthropologists to death investigations. Since 2000, the author has been providing one to three day workshops to a small number of city and county agencies, as well as opening up a limited number of spaces in a semester-long, undergraduate course in forensic anthropology. The focus of each workshop varies according to the agency requesting the training. The workshop presented to the Hennepin County Medical Examiner's Office, for example, emphasized the information possible to determine from the analysis of skeletal remains and another, presented to the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office, on the location, documentation, and collection of surface-deposited remains. Each workshop provides the participants with hands-on opportunities to apply the methods/protocols they are introduced to. Additionally, a two-day workshop on the investigation of clandestine graves, jointly organized by the author and the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, the state crime laboratory, is scheduled for the summer of 2003.

It is the opinion of the author that the presentation of the lectures and training workshops on various aspects of Forensic Anthropology has had, overall, a positive effect on death investigation in Minnesota. It is apparent that the cornerstones of the U.S. criminal justice system are law enforcement, the legal system, and forensic science. Each of these is inextricably linked to the other two and justice requires communication and interaction between them. The workshops and presentations have worked to establish such communication and interaction and have resulted in an increased understanding by the law enforcement, legal, and larger forensic science communities of the contribution of forensic anthropologists to death investigation. A greater understanding and appreciation by the anthropologist of the roles, responsibilities, and procedures employed by different agencies in these situations has also occurred. Specific benefits from these training opportunities include establishing a relationship for future cooperation in relevant cases, clarifying the role of the forensic anthropologist in such cases, and informing crime scene personnel of established protocol for location, documentation, collection, and packaging of human remains resulting in more thorough scene processing. However, there are opportunities for the information and experiences presented in training workshops to be misused. A little knowledge can be dangerous and there have been instances where, after a short workshop or semester-course, a participant decides they are qualified to analyze human skeletal remains. This is, of course, potentially harmful for the case, as well as for the reputation of Forensic Anthropology as a legitimate and respected forensic science. Such misuse of the information presented in a training workshop may be avoided by clearly stating the objectives of the workshop, defining the educational and experiential qualifications necessary to be a practicing forensic anthropologist, and discussing the consequences of going beyond one's area of expertise.

It is likely that the short seminars and training workshops in Forensic Anthropology will continue and, in fact, occur more regularly in Minnesota. The effect of such educational opportunities on death investigation is still being assessed; however, it is the author's opinion that the effect has been primarily positive, resulting in a better understanding by the legal, law enforcement, medico-legal and forensic science communities of what forensic anthropology is, when the involvement of a forensic anthropologist is warranted, and what the contributions of forensic anthropology are in investigations involving skeletal, decomposed, or burned human remains.

Forensic Anthropology, Education, Short-Courses