



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

### H91 Outside Traditional Skeletal Casework: A Forensic Anthropologist in a Medical Examiner's Office

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a new understanding of the duties and responsibilities of a forensic anthropologist employed outside traditional skeletal casework.

An appreciation for the many ways an anthropologist can function in the medical examiner office environment, and a revitalization of the importance of case reports in forensic anthropology.

This presentation will relate the author's personal experience as a forensic anthropologist employed in a county government medical examiner office. It is hoped that this presentation will increase

awareness that non-academic opportunities exist for those with forensic anthropology training. The roles and responsibilities of the author in the medical examiner office draw on all an anthropologist's skills, not only knowledge of human osteology, but also sociocultural and archaeological skills. The author's responsibilities that will be discussed include:

- Assisting the forensic pathologist at autopsy
- Managing the morgue and supplies
- Coordinating histology and toxicology laboratories
- Taking post-mortem x-rays
- Scene and morgue photography
- Computer maintenance and database management
- Processing of evidence
- Maintaining the bloodborne pathogen exposure control plan (OSHA)
- Coordinating scientific donations and managing a comparative skeletal collection
- Participating as an on-call death investigator
- Non-skeletal crime scene processing and investigation
- Meeting with families, law enforcement officers, and attorneys
- Delivering lectures to civic organizations, schools and universities, and law enforcement training academies
- Clerical duties (e.g., preparation of death certificates)
- Providing forensic anthropology consultations and reports. These consultations range from skeletal scene recovery with full-length reports to one-page diagrams or reports produced in the morgue at autopsy.

The largest contribution of the author is in the morgue, where verbal opinions regarding trauma and post-mortem interval can be given on-the-spot to the medical examiner.

The author feels there is a common perception in the discipline that "research presentations" have become more preferred than "case reports." This implies that a distinction exists between research forensic anthropology and applied forensic anthropology. When a distinction can be drawn between application and research, a feedback loop can be set up to compliment both. This loop consists of applied forensic anthropologists in medical examiner offices that generate research questions, and research forensic anthropologists that provide the tools for applied anthropologists to do their work. The future health of forensic anthropology will require constant and open lines of communication in this loop. This communication is mediated by the "case report" in various journals and/or conferences. Our discipline should work to rid itself of the idea that little can be learned case studies.

Most of the author's daily responsibilities were not part of the "traditional" forensic anthropology graduate training, but rather were learned on-the-job. Few forensic anthropologists have an opportunity to work on a daily basis with forensic pathologists. Although the training the author received in graduate school laid a solid foundation for working in a medical examiner office, it is proposed that forensic anthropology graduate programs expand their curricula to prepare students for careers outside traditional academic research. A curriculum designed to prepare one for work in a medical examiner office should include courses such as:

- Grief counseling
- Sociological aspects of crime
- Epidemiology and public health
- Evidence handling and curation
- Computer technology and database management
- Website authoring
- Legal processes and post-mortem laws
- Non-skeletal crime scene processing and medical history investigation
- Bloodborne pathogen/OSHA plan authoring
- Funeral home industry information



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- Public and professional speaking instruction

Forensic anthropologists in the new millennium can offer more than osteological analysis to medical examiner offices. We are best suited to work within this type of system because of our holistic and comparative training.

**Forensic Anthropology, Medical Examiner Offices, Forensic Training Programs**