



Odontology Section – 2005

F19 Avoiding Confusion in a Small-Scale Disaster

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Attendees will be given recommendations for handling victim identification logistics in a small-scale disaster.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by providing conclusions and recommendations, which may assist others in the forensic community when faced with a similar situation.

In April 2003 a construction accident precipitated a natural gas explosion and fire that destroyed four street-level stores and second-floor apartments in a small strip plaza in Toronto. Initially, the police determined by interviewing family members that there were six individuals unaccounted for following the incident. The family dentists of the presumed decedents were contacted and coroner's warrants were issued in order to obtain six sets of original dental records.

The bodies of six victims were recovered from the accident site and transferred to coroner's office for identification within 24 hours of the incident. Two forensic odontologists commenced the identification procedures on Victim #1, using the standard methods of dental charting and a visual comparison of antemortem and postmortem radiographs. Each of the six sets of dental records was examined in sequence. This process was then repeated before it was concluded that Victim #1 did not match any of the records available. The Coroner and the police were advised that it was likely there may be a seventh victim as yet undiscovered. A second search of the disaster site over the next 24 hours did indeed result in the discovery of a seventh body. The dental records for Victim #1 were ultimately obtained and an identification confirmed.

This episode underlined the importance of never assuming that an open population is closed or that a closed population is actually closed. In addition, there may occasionally be a delay in notification from next-of-kin that a family member is missing. Despite the pressure from many sources to process victims quickly in an event of this scale, a delay may be unavoidable in the interests of exercising due caution and prudence in the identification process. It is recommended that the police carefully re-examine local missing persons lists and canvass the neighborhood thoroughly whenever a small scale disaster occurs that involves multiple victims.

Finally, the relatively small size of this incident resulted in pressure on the forensic dentists to identify the decedents within an abbreviated period of time. It is the author's opinion that this pressure is unique to small-scale mass fatality incidents. Such pressure must be resisted, in order that appropriate procedures for the identification of multiple fatality incidents can be completed accurately.

Missing Persons, Dental Identification, Small-Scale Mass Disaster