



Physical Anthropology Section – 2005

H79 Serial Murder With Dismemberment of Victims in an Attempt to Hinder Identification: A Case Resolved Through Multidisciplinary Collaboration

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The goal of this presentation is to illustrate the importance of collaborative forensic investigation, and highlight the specific contributions of forensic anthropology to resolving complex cases involving postmortem mutilation of bodies to conceal their identity, and cause and manner of death.

Collaboration between forensic anthropologists and other medicolegal investigators has proven increasingly important in the investigation of homicides, particularly in cases where bodies have been extensively altered postmortem in an attempt to conceal the identity of victims and the cause and manner of death. Positive identification of victims and the linking of crimes by patterns of postmortem dismemberment are increasingly recognized as areas where forensic anthropologists can make important contributions.

This paper presents a serial homicide case that was resolved through the active collaboration of homicide detectives, the District Attorney's Office, and various forensic scientists. Key to the prosecution's strategy in this case was a linking of three homicides and positive identification of the victims. While identification of the second and third victims was relatively straightforward, the first (Victim 1) was more complex, and required collaboration between the Assistant District Attorney, a local hospital, and the forensic anthropologist. Victim 1's body was intentionally mutilated and dismembered, and parts had been disposed of over a wide geographic area. Some remains (a torso and attached right arm) were subsequently found by chance, while investigators were led to others (the head, upper neck and severed left forearm) by the co-defendant in the case, whose testimony was key in revealing details of the postmortem history of Victim 1 that would otherwise have been difficult to reconstruct from the physical evidence alone. The co-defendant also led police to tools allegedly used to dismember the victim. Matching of the different parts of Victim 1's body was achieved through forensic anthropological analysis. The remains were defleshed and patterns of sharp force trauma associated with the intentional severing of the head and fingers were identified and compared. Skeletal analysis revealed that the head had been severed between the fifth and sixth cervical vertebrae by multiple blows with an edged weapon (later identified in testimony to homicide detectives as a machete). In addition to a match between chop marks on the neck vertebrae recovered from the two locations, a small portion of the transverse process of the fifth cervical vertebra was found still attached to the trunk, and was matched with the rest of the vertebra found still articulated with the neck and head. Similarities in the manner and location at which the fingers were severed linked all three victims.

Although DNA analysis was successful in demonstrating a match between Victim 1's head, left arm, trunk and bloodstains found in the defendant's apartment and storage locker, this was not sufficient for a positive identification because comparative DNA could not be obtained from living relatives. Examination of the defleshed skull, however, revealed evidence of an apparent healed gunshot wound to the left frontal and parietal bones. The injuries had not been seen at autopsy, as they were concealed by soft tissue. The forensic anthropologist requested a search for local hospital records with the hope that antemortem and postmortem comparisons of the gunshot wounds might lead to an identification. After an extensive search, both a police report and hospital records were located. Comparisons of antemortem and postmortem radiographs revealed multiple points of correspondence, allowing a positive identification. Upon reviewing the evidence against him, and facing a capital murder trial, the key defendant in the case pled guilty to the murders and is now serving three consecutive life terms in prison.

Dismemberment, Postmortem Modification, Positive Identification