



Pathology Biology Section – 2006

G21 Visual Misidentifications of Human Remains: Lessons Learned

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn of two visual misidentifications made by parents after the death of their sons.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by examining the procedures followed after one of the parents alerted officials of the possible misidentification and suggests (1) methods to avoid visual misidentifications, and (2) measures to routinely follow to respond to claims of bodies being “mixed-up” in the morgue.

Misidentifications are often reported by the general media and rarely presented formally in the forensic science literature. This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by assisting the forensic community by pointing out the situations that most commonly result in misidentifications, the steps needed to prevent the misidentifications, and other measures to take to address where the misidentification occurred.

An automobile driven by a drunk driver, struck two 14-year-old white males, Child A and Child B, as they walked home from a skateboarding park. The mother of one of the boys (Mother A) “claimed” Child A as her son at the scene and rode to the hospital in the ambulance with the child. A second ambulance transported Child B. Child B died in the emergency department; “Mother B” and her husband arrived at the emergency department after Child B died and claimed him as their son. Child A died hours later in the pediatric intensive care unit with his parents and many others in attendance at his bed. An autopsy performed the following day on both of the boys showed the cause of both deaths to be multiple injuries due to pedestrian struck by a motor vehicle. Both children had severe head injuries. Photographs and fingerprints were obtained during the autopsy. Close family members viewed the body of Child A at the funeral home and then had him buried at a local cemetery. The family who claimed Child B had him cremated after an open-casket visitation and funeral. During the open-casket visitation, many students from the school the boys attended strongly voiced their opinion that the boy in the casket was Child A and not Child B. The parents denied the claims of the visiting children and the funeral directors believed the parents.

About one year later, Mother A reported that she believed she had claimed the wrong child; her opinion developed after reading the autopsy reports and recognizing the report with her son’s name described the other child and vice versa. Mother A had antemortem fingerprints available for comparison with the two sets of postmortem fingerprints obtained at the autopsy; the prints matched the postmortem prints of Child B. Child A was exhumed and antemortem dental records were obtained for both children. The forensic odontologist compared the two sets of antemortem dental records to the exhumed remains of Child A; the odontologist was blinded as to the identity of the antemortem records. The antemortem records provided by Mother B matched the postmortem dental features of Child A. By both fingerprint and dental record comparison it was determined that Child A was the child of Mother B and Child B was the child of Mother A. In one photograph of Child B, the name of the child is clearly visible on the hospital identification band with the associated autopsy case number indicating the bodies were not mixed up in the morgue after being banded in the hospital. The parents visually misidentified the children.

Lessons learned from this case are multiple and include: (1) Visual identifications are not always accurate – even parents can claim the wrong individual as their child. (2) Incidents involving victims of the same sex, race, and approximately the same age, should be identified using a biological method such as fingerprints, dental record comparison, medical Xray comparison, or DNA. (3) Photographs of all identifying tags with the autopsy case number clearly visible should be routinely obtained.

Human Identification, Forensic Science, Exhumation