



Physical Anthropology Section – 2006

H49 Working With Family Members of Decedents: A Discussion of Techniques for Forensic Scientists

Paul S. Sledzik, MS, National Transportation Safety Board, Office of Transportation Disaster Assistance, 490 L'Enfant Plaza East, SW, Washington, DC 20594; Lee Meadows Jantz, PhD*, Forensic Anthropology Center, University of Tennessee, 250 South Stadium Hall, Knoxville, TN 37996-0720; Amy Z. Mundorff, MA*, Simon Fraser University, 611-1485 West 6th Avenue, Vancouver, BC V6H 4G1, Canada; Giovanna M. Vidoli, MSc*, Office of Chief Medical Examiner, 520 First Avenue, New York, NY 10016; Thomas D. Holland, PhD*, Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, Central Identification Laboratory, 310 Worcester Avenue, Hickam AFB, HI 96853; Darinka X. MileusnicPolchan, MD, PhD*, University of Tennessee Medical Center, Department of Pathology/Knox County Office of the Medical Examiner, 1924 Alcoa Highway, Knoxville, TN 37920; and Mercedes Doretti*, and Luis Fondebrider*, Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, Av. Rivadavia 2443, Piso 2 Dep. 4, Buenos Aires, 1034, Argentina*

This session features short presentations and a discussion by forensic scientists who have worked with family members of decedents in a range of events and a variety of ways. The goal of these presentations is to elucidate techniques to help forensic scientists interact more effectively with family members. The areas of disasters, human rights, body donation, and the medical examiner office are represented on the panel.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating how forensic scientists possess important information for the family of the murdered, missing, or killed. Sharing this information allows families to understand the circumstances of death and may help them move through the grief process. The techniques used by forensic scientist to provide this information to family members are important in the humanitarian efforts of the field.

For the family and friends of the murdered, missing, or killed, an important measure of dignity afforded them is the professionalism employed by forensic scientists when analyzing and identifying the remains of the deceased. Despite differences in the process of grief throughout the world, families typically want information about the death of the deceased. Obtaining information about the circumstances of death (whether through intentional violence, natural disaster, accident, or suicide) helps family members move through the grief process, despite the fact that the particulars of the death may be difficult to hear. When families seek out this information, they often turn to forensic scientists, whose knowledge, experience, and work product become the sources for answers to their questions.

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Interacting with family members of the deceased presents the forensic scientist a challenge. Forensic scientists engage with family members in a variety of situations, from individual cases to group settings, in person and via email or telephone, but most have little or no training in working with the bereaved, despite knowing that forensic information is vital for family members. Families expect compassion, directness, and honesty from forensic scientists. However, forensic scientists may not be able to reveal all aspects of their analysis for legal reasons. The counterpoise to family needs is the sometime conflicting demands of science. Data collection, sampling, and storage ensure that scientific methods are created and refined. Forensic scientists are often the lone representatives of science to families, and they must reflect the importance of science and the nature the remains play in the scientific process.

The Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996 tasks the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) with managing family needs following aviation disasters. To provide this support, the NTSB establishes and manages a multi-agency family assistance center. Among other types of information, the center provides updates about the search for and recovery of remains and the identification process. Families who visit the accident site often have questions of a forensic nature. After departing the center, NTSB staff members keep families updated as the investigation proceeds, and often answer forensic questions that were not asked at the center. Their desire for information may often extend for months or years following the accident. Family concerns encompass questions of suffering of the deceased just prior to their death, information related to condition of remains, and methods used to identify remains.

The experience of the body donation program at the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Center (FAC) reveals that families want their experience to benefit others who may go through similar experiences in the future. Body donations originate by self-donation, family donation or, as in Tennessee, as unclaimed remains donated by the state medical examiner. For FAC staff, interaction with the family is very important. When a person donates their own body as an expressed desire, the next of kin must agree to the donation, or the donation will not occur. Because donation to the FAC is different than traditional anatomical school donations, families may not understand the process of donation and what happens to the remains. Many are concerned about what remains, if any, will be returned to them. FAC staff realize that once families understand



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the process and grasp the importance of the science that will result from the donation, the donation takes on greater meaning, and families become more comfortable with the process.

The primary function of medical examiners is to document the condition of remains and the presence of illness and injuries. Sometimes overlooked is the importance of providing family members with information to understand the circumstances of death. Based on the experience of one medical examiner's office, several actions appear to be appreciated by families. These actions, sometimes overlooked by medical examiners, include initiating contact with the family, facilitating access to other appropriate services and agencies, and making provisions for adequate viewing and/or meeting facilities.

At the World Trade Center disaster, family members relied on anthropologists for clear and honest descriptions of the remains recovered. The questions from family members extended beyond description of remains to include explaining decomposition, fragmentation, and the process of preserving remains, of which the anthropologists were a part. Anthropologists went beyond their expertise in analyzing human remains to help family members understand the forces involved in the disaster and why the decedent was not completely recovered.

The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) supports improved direct contact between families of victims and forensic teams. EAAF believes that forensic scientists should assist victims' families in gaining access to investigative sites. Families are provided basic information before, during, and after forensic examinations, and the potential outcomes of a mission are explained to them. EAAF anthropologists address families' concerns, doubts, questions, and objections and they promote tools to provide families with the results of forensic investigations (following international recommendations and forensic protocols.) EAAF also supports respect for cultural differences in religious and funeral rites, with the goal of assisting families with dealing with grief. The group believes that failure to consider these issues may lead to a secondary assault for family members—that forensic scientists may cause additional suffering to those they are assisting. Cultural and religious practices of death and reburial should be respected during the investigation.

The experience of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command/Central Identification Laboratory with family members is unique. The visibility and political nature of the POW/MIA issue in the United States complicates their interactions with families.

Family Members, Death Information, Grief Process