



Physical Anthropology Section – 2006

H50 Anthropologist Directed Triage Teams From Three Distinct Mass Fatality Events Involving Human Fragmentation

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After attending this presentation the attendee will learn the various functions that can be performed by anthropologist directed triage teams at mass fatality events involving human fragmentation.

Due to the increasing number of incidents involving human fragmentation, this presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by helping the forensic community learn about the skills and contributions of forensic anthropologists during these types of events.

This presentation will describe the process of triage as the first stage in identifying fragmented human remains from mass fatality incidents. Specifically, it will discuss the role of forensic anthropologist directed triage teams in three distinct mass disaster events.

Triage is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as, “the actions of sorting according to quality” “to pick or cull” and, “... the assignment of degrees of urgency...in order to decide the order or suitability of treatment...” It was commonly used in the early 1700’s when describing the sorting of wool in degrees of fineness and quality. Triage has also been used in the military to describe the sorting of injured in accordance to the seriousness of their injuries, to ensure that the most critical are medically treated first.

In mass disasters, the first stage in the identification of human remains is often the triage station. Traditionally, an anthropologist or pathologist, depending on the disaster type and the condition of the remains, directs triage. This paper will discuss anthropologist-directed triage stations in three very different mass fatality scenarios, involving significant variation in the number of human remains as well as their condition and degree of fragmentation. Significantly, the process of recovery was also quite different in all three incidents, which affected the composition and duties of the triage teams. The World Trade Center disaster, with 2749 victims, involved nearly 20,000 fragments of human remains, recovered predominantly by fire personnel, over a period of eight months. The crash of American Airlines Flight 587, with 256 victims, involved just over 2000 fragments of human remains, recovered within a few days by police personnel, with the assistance of the medical examiner’s staff. Finally, the Staten Island Ferry crash will be discussed, with 10 victims, involving the recovery of approximately 35 fragments of human remains. These were recovered within a few hours, again with the assistance of the medical examiner’s staff. In each of the three disasters mentioned above, the human remains had first been collected at the scene of the disaster and later transported to the Office of Chief Medical Examiner for processing and identification.

Upon reaching the Medical Examiner’s office the remains were examined at the Triage Station, which was directed by a forensic anthropologist. This was an important first step in the lengthy process of identification. The triage team was empowered to sort human from non-human remains, separate out commingled remains and multiple remains in one recovery bag, as well as to re-articulate or re-associate disparate pieces within a body bag. This team also labeled anatomical elements and recorded recovery locations, which were later documented at the medical examiner’s table. Importantly, the differential manifestation of fragmentation in each of these incidents dictated that the anthropologist’s role at triage be tailored to that incident.

In addition to detailing the differences and similarities between the role of triage at these three distinct mass disaster events, this paper will present lessons learned, including proposals for actions to be undertaken by anthropologists at triage stations, depending on the type of disaster.

Triage, Commingling, Human Fragmentation