H54 Anthropology Responds to Hurricane Katrina

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about the unique challenges of victim identification presented by Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent failure of the levies surrounding New Orleans.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by conducting a review of the forensic response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster and offering a positive after-action critique of the way in which several new challenges were met. The forensic effort following Hurricane Katrina serves as a way-point in further developing an efficient model for victim identification following a major natural or man-made disaster.

When Hurricane Katrina slammed into the coastal towns in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, and breached the levies surrounding New Orleans, it created some extraordinary obstacles for the disaster aid workers responsible for recovering and identifying the victims. Among the many challenges were a recovery effort that spanned a broad geographic area; poor preservation of the bodies from prolonged exposure in a warm, wet environment; and contamination of the bodies by water-borne bacteria, chemicals and toxins. The storm surge also damaged coastal cemeteries and mausoleums, resulting in previously interred and entombed bodies being scattered among the debris. Two other unique factors posed significant problems for victim identification. The evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people who lived in the path of the approaching storm – as well as evacuations during the aftermath – hampered the ability of federal personnel to set up a single, physical location to serve as a family assistance center where antemortem data could be collected to facilitate identification. Additionally, the loss of antemortem medical and dental records destroyed by winds and flooding, combined with the relatively low socio-economic status of many of the victims, made acquisition of the required medical and dental information difficult, and in some cases, impossible. The widespread flooding and subsequent loss of housing also prevents collection of nuclear DNA exemplars from the homes of victims, resulting in decreased effectiveness of the best identification tool.

Hurricanes Katrina marked the first time that the Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT) deployed two Disaster Portable Morgue Units (DPMUs) to one event. Having both morgues operational required an extraordinary effort to insure adequate numbers of qualified personnel, supplies and provisioning, physical plant, and the many other considerations that make such a response successful. The subsequent passing of Hurricane Rita forced a shutdown of all disaster victim identification efforts for several days, creating a severe test for those involved in logistics and planning.

In this presentation, the authors hope to address many of these issues and provide several different perspectives on the response by DMORT members and others in the forensic community, as well as answer questions by attendees.

Mass Disaster, Hurricane Katrina, Forensic Science

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