D50 Mass Graves as a Waste Disposal Solution?

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the nature of the dilemma faced by the UK Government regarding the preparation for and anticipation of a national influenza pandemic. Such a scenario could create "excess deaths" that would exceed the capabilities of existing burial, cremation, and funeral facilities. The use of mass graves in different contexts will be examined, with special reference to their value as a modern "waste" disposal solution. They will be compared to animal burial sites used for control of the spread of disease as an analogue for human "collective" burials in a pandemic situation. Participants will be able to understand the impact of such graves on the environment, in terms of landscape issues, alteration of vegetation, and any chemical and biological interactions between the infill and the surroundings. In addition, they will be able to recognize the social and economic effects of such graves on the local and wider communities.

This research brings together three significant and timely themes increasingly relevant in the UK today. Mass fatality incidents and environmental issues are at the forefront of the Government's agenda. This presentation will impact the forensic science community by addressing the potential impact of mass graves on the environment, and is unique in its approach from the joint perspectives of forensic and environmental science. This research examines the options open to the United Kingdom government if it is faced with "excess deaths" caused by a national pandemic, and evaluates the most effective disposal methods available. It takes into consideration the effect that such collective burials may have on the environment, economy and social framework of communities. It will demonstrate how the Government is being pro-active in addressing environmental issues, and how well the United Kingdom's unique spatial and geographical circumstances are being tackled. It is hoped that the results of this research could inform and influence Home Office policy on the most environmentally, socially and economically efficient method of mass body disposal.

In light of the increasing threat of an avian flu pandemic in the UK, the Home Office have been investigating a range of methods for managing the potential problem of excess deaths that could exceed the capabilities of existing burial and funeral facilities.[1,2] There is currently unprecedented pressure on the Government to find an environmentally, ethically, socially and economically sound solution to the problem of disposal of bodies.

This paper aims to examine the nature of the problem faced by the government, and assess the value of mass graves as a modern 'waste' disposal solution. This study will investigate the possible alternatives to mass graves, such as cremation and individual burials, in response to pandemic situations. It will also evaluate and compare mass graves to landfill sites and the mass animal burial sites typified by the Foot and Mouth Crisis of 2001-02, with reference to minimizing the impact on the environment. This research will lead the way for further development of a twenty-first century 'waste' disposal solution model for the United Kingdom's specific geographical and spatial dilemma; as well as demonstrating the government's commitment to finding solutions whilst incorporating environmental 'best practice' as a key driver.

References:

1 Stones, A (2006) 'Mass Graves Planned if Bird Flu Pandemic Reaches Britain', www.telegraph.co.uk.

2 Cabinet Office (2006) 'Contingency Planning for A Possible Influenza Pandemic: Version 2', www.preparingforemergencies.gov.uk/emergency/.

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