



Physical Anthropology Section – 2008

H112 The Utility of the Identification Unit Concept in the Medical Examiner Setting

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This presentation will demonstrate the formation, standard operating procedures, and immediate value of a specialized medical examiner identification unit staffed with anthropologists. Attendees will be given a comprehensive description of the innovative process that has led to success in difficult identifications of unidentified decedents for both current and cold cases at the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office.

The development of a specialized Identification Unit staffed by anthropologists in the medical examiner office setting will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating a novel and creative solution to the problems associated with identification of unknown individuals.

Recent progress on the identification of three remaining decedents from the Houston "Mass Murders" of 1973 will be highlighted.

The Harris County Medical Examiner's Identification Unit (ID Unit) ensures all avenues available to identify an unknown decedent are pursued and all unclaimed decedents receive an appropriate and timely final disposition. The responsibility of the ID Unit is threefold: (1) to construct and disseminate complete unknown decedent descriptions, obtain all postmortem records, and submit biological samples for the purpose of identification, (2) to maintain and regularly audit case files of unidentified decedents for application of new technologies when appropriate, and (3) to process unclaimed decedents for final disposition. The ID Unit uses autopsy findings and anthropologic analysis to construct the biological profile of unknown decedents and disseminates the information to law enforcement, the media, and several websites. Biological samples are collected and submitted to the University of North Texas to be entered into CODISMP. Full skeletal radiographs and dental radiographs are taken and compared to possible matches as necessary. Cold cases of unidentified remains are audited for completeness and accuracy. In cooperation with the Harris County Community and Economic Development Department, unclaimed decedents and families in need of assistance for funeral arrangements are referred to Harris County Bereavement Services.

Each member of the ID Unit takes the major responsibility for a set of related tasks beyond anthropologic analysis, although all are cross-trained in ID Unit responsibilities. The collaboration of anthropologists and a full-time Identification Specialist at the HCME has provided the initiative, experience and staff time to move forward on difficult identifications of both current and decades-old cases, as well as provide for final disposition of those decedents without resources. As a direct result of this new program, three decedents from 1980s' cases have recently been identified and the next of kin notified. Significant progress has also been made on the identifications of three adolescent male decedents received by the HCME 35 years ago as alleged victims of a serial murderer. On August 8, 1973, seventeen year-old Elmer Wayne Henley fatally shot 33 year-old Dean Corll. The law enforcement investigation of this shooting led to the discovery of 27 adolescent male homicide victims and the eventual life imprisonments of Henley and an 18 year-old named David Brooks. Corll and 26 of the victims were brought to the Harris County Morgue (previous incarnation of the HCME) for autopsy, sending the office into disaster response mode. The majority of the victims (21) were identified within three months of autopsy and two more were identified in 1985 and 1994, respectively. The three remaining decedents are receiving special attention from the HCME ID Unit that includes a clay facial reconstruction project in collaboration with the FACES Laboratory at Louisiana State University.

Successes with these types of cold cases and the continuing improvement in all aspects of the identification and final disposition of difficult current cases demonstrates the value of the ID Unit to the mission of the HCME.

Unidentified, Anthropology, Corll/Henley