



Physical Anthropology Section – 2008

H69 Accreditation of the Small Skeletal Laboratory: It is Easier Than You Think!

Vincent J. Sava, MA*, JPAC, Central Identification Lab, 310 Worcester Avenue, Building 45, Hickam AFB, HI 96853; and John E. Byrd, PhD, JPAC, Central Identification Lab, 310 Worcester Avenue, Hickam AFB, HI 96853-5530

Upon the completion of this presentation, the participants will have a greater understanding of the importance of accreditation to the small skeletal laboratory, problems faced by laboratories working toward accreditation and effective work-arounds and solutions. Effective management strategies employed during the accreditation process, and the assistance available from the CIL in order to obtain accreditation. Additionally, the participant will gain an appreciation of the importance of accreditation in elevation the forensic anthropology profession.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating how quality assurance programs in forensic laboratories and activities have been a growing trend over the past decade. Since 1999 the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, Central Identification Laboratory (JPAC-CIL) has implemented a stringent quality assurance program to ensure the scientific integrity of its casework. The CIL's quality assurance program ultimately led to the Laboratory's accreditation in trace evidence by the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors Laboratory Accreditation Board (ASCLD-LAB) in 2003—the first forensic skeletal identification laboratory to be so credentialed. However, smaller skeletal laboratories, lacking the resources of the CIL, have been reluctant to undertake accreditation. Assistance and guidance outlined in this presentation may ease their accreditation process. Once additional skeletal laboratories are accredited, human identification can become a separate recognized discipline within ASCLD-LAB.

Accreditation of forensic laboratories is becoming the norm in the forensic profession with some jurisdictions now legislating accreditation. With accreditation becoming almost universally accepted in the forensic profession, failure to achieve this milestone may have serious jurisprudence implications for deficient laboratories in the coming years. The human identification profession and forensic anthropology in particular, has lagged in efforts to have its laboratories accredited—with one notable exception.

Since 2003, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, Central Identification Laboratory (JPAC-CIL) has been accredited under the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors Laboratory Accreditation Board (ASCLD-LAB). The CIL sought accreditation for the following reasons:

- To improve the quality of CIL services provided to the POW/MIA mission.
- To develop and maintain criteria that can be used by the CIL to assess its level of performance and to strengthen its operation.
- To provide an independent, impartial, and objective system by which the CIL can benefit from a total operational review.
- To offer to the POW/MIA mission and to other users of CIL services a means of determining that the CIL has met established standards.

Admittedly, the CIL was in a very favorable position to achieve accreditation relative to other skeletal identification laboratories. This research had ample budget, support from the higher echelons of command, and a management staff dedicated to the effort. As such, numerous obstacles were surmounted, including but not limited to:

- SOP writing and implementation
- Security upgrades
- Facility improvements and expansion
- Hiring of a full time Quality Manager and additional staff to offset declines in productivity
- Equipment modernization
- Available time
- Progressive attitude of those involved

During the initial accreditation process, and in the intervening years now leading to re-accreditation, the CIL gained an appreciation to just which obstacles are the most formidable for the smaller laboratory. The findings are surprising. All of the above obstacles have relatively easy and inexpensive fixes and uncomplicated work-arounds. Save one—the quality and quantity of staff involved.

In this regard, the smaller laboratory has the advantage. A small staff with little annual turnover is easier to train, monitor, and to exercise corrective action over. In the CIL, with a staff of over 70 frequently deployed personnel (including managers), and an annual turnover rate of 12-20 %, accreditation becomes increasingly difficult as management involvement with accreditation becomes diluted in favor of other issues. This is exacerbated by the fact that laboratory policies and SOPs naturally become more intricate as the quantity of staff increases. Add the fact that CIL case work (and human identification, in general) is more diverse than other forensic disciplines. Taken together, training is consistently a problem as there is almost no instance where the entire staff can be assembled and trained more than superficially on the current SOPs. In effect, as staff size increases, control is lost, in favor of a "herding cats" scenario.

Other obstacles noted above seem formidable but chances are the small skeletal laboratory already has rudimentary systems and programs in place



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that would only need minor adjustments to bring them into compliance for accreditation. For example, existing intrusion detection systems (IDS) on university buildings may lend themselves to relatively inexpensive upgrades to achieve the desired standard. One university related that they already had an IDS in order to keep unauthorized persons from tampering with their x-ray machine. This university imposed safety requirement was adapted to evidence security. Evidence was eventually stored in a locked cabinet co-located in the room with the x-ray machine. Laboratories situated on the second floor or above do not need bars or similar barriers on the windows in most instances. These types of work-arounds are numerous and widely varied and, are limited only by the imagination of the staffs involved.

As the CIL continues to expand its quality assurance programs, to include seeking re-accreditation under the more stringent ISO 17025 standards, new sets of problems are generated. One is the issue of the competency of its subcontractors. Under ISO, the CIL is responsible to prove the competency of those it selects to subcontract tasks. Accordingly, the CIL has a certification program where we send our staff to certify the quality of operations of a subcontractor by conducting an on-site survey of their facilities and operations.

For smaller skeletal laboratories that have the potential to act as a CIL subcontractor, the certification program is a valuable tool with which to achieve accreditation. Using ASCLD-LAB standards, the CIL will survey your laboratory and provide guidance and advice on what needs to be done to achieve accreditation. A certification by the CIL means that the assisted laboratory can perform subcontracted work for the CIL and only has minor obstacles to overcome to achieve full accreditation. In addition to sending teams to your laboratory, the CIL will help your laboratory get started by making its laboratory manual available to the participants. This will improve the quality of your laboratory from the onset while saving your organization hundreds of man-hours in work and staffing.

In conclusion, the CIL believes it is in the best interests of the small skeletal laboratory to become accredited. Many of the staff in these facilities eventually become employed at the CIL. Additionally, until the qualifications of obtaining diplomate status in ABFA become more inclusive and less exclusive, working in an accredited laboratory may be the only professional credentials enjoyed by the majority of anthropologists. Finally, ASCLD-LAB is amenable to adopting Human Identification as a recognized discipline provided more skeletal laboratories become accredited. Once this is done, anthropologists will have a stake in formulating the criteria for accrediting skeletal identification laboratories.

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