



### F32 Cracking Coding Dilemmas in Missing Persons Cases

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After attending this presentation, the attendees will understand how the forensic odontologist can assist law enforcement in the proper recording of the dental records of long-term missing persons.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by highlighting the importance of the forensic odontologist in missing persons cases.

This presentation will show how pertinent dental information entered by the forensic odontologist can assist investigators in solving missing person's cases. The comparison of a missing person's dental records with the dental evidence from unknown remains has long been recognized as one of the most reliable means of positive scientific identification. The services of a forensic odontologist rather than the family dentist should be utilized for recording missing person's dental records. The forensic odontologist is extensively trained to recognize the subtle nuances in dental chart interpretation that, if recorded erroneously, will cause a misidentification. The forensic odontologist will also be aware of those rarely occurring anomalies that warrant attention and publication to the appropriate agencies for securing victim identification.

As of July 2, 2008, in New Jersey, there were 1,349 missing persons entered into the National Crime Information Center (N.C.I.C.) database. Of this number, only 133 missing person's records include dental charting. In contrast, dental charting has been entered on most unidentified person's records from New Jersey into N.C.I.C., if teeth are recovered. This discrepancy can be attributed to the utilization of forensic odontologist by the New Jersey County Medical Examiners that do a forensic dental examination on the unidentified person. Because of the low number of missing person's records with dental, an initiative is underway at the Forensic Anthropology Laboratory, Office of Forensic Sciences, and New Jersey State Police, to use forensic odontologists to chart, radiograph, and code the dental records of all missing persons. A secure central repository for New Jersey long-term missing person's dental records has been established. This allows for accurate dental entries to be made into N.C.I.C. and other national missing person's databases.

A recent case involved the discovery of skeletonized remains in New York state, with a nearly complete dentition. All thirty-two teeth were fully erupted and present except for #23, #24, and #26 that appeared radiographically to have been lost through postmortem avulsion. What was strikingly unique was the presence of two bony impacted teeth found distal to the mandibular third molars.

Recognizing the importance of this information, the New York forensic odontologist notified the New York investigating officer. After explaining the rarity of the decedent's dental condition, the odontologist suggested contacting the New York State dental licensing department or the New York State Dental Society to request their assistance by emailing the description of the dental information to their list of dentists. A New Jersey forensic odontologist, who remembered recently entering a New Jersey missing person with similar dental charting into the New Jersey centralized dental database, notified the New Jersey State Police Forensic Anthropologist and the New York investigating officer. A tentative identification was made by examining an emailed photograph of the decedent's panoramic x-ray. The local New Jersey law enforcement agency was notified and the identification was confirmed after the original dental film was brought to the Medical Examiner's Office and compared by their forensic odontologist.

Utilizing trained forensic odontologists in missing person's cases will allow maximum potential for positive identifications when compared with unidentified remains.

#### **Forensic Odontology, N.C.I.C., Missing Persons**