



Pathology Biology Section – 2009

G54 Trends in Forensic Investigations Into the Missing: Observations From the ICRC

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain awareness of trends identified in the application of forensic medical sciences to investigations into the whereabouts and fate of persons missing as a result of armed conflict, internal violence, or catastrophes, as observed by the forensic unit of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Attendees will also learn about the steps taken by the ICRC to meet challenges posed by these trends.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by outlining emerging challenges posed to the wider forensic community by investigations into persons gone missing as a result of armed conflict, internal violence or catastrophes, as observed by the ICRC. The trends and challenges identified in this paper will assist in the design of strategies for effective and efficient contribution to this emerging field by forensic practitioners, institutions, and service providers.

In February 2003, the ICRC organized an International Conference on The Missing in Geneva, Switzerland. Recommendations were adopted to prevent and resolve the tragedy of persons unaccounted for as a result of armed conflict and internal violence. These included recommendations on forensic best practices for the recovery, management and identification of the dead in challenging contexts, including: roles, duties, responsibilities and applicable ethical standards for forensic practitioners and teams; guidelines for the recovery and storage of human remains; criteria for forensic human identification; principles for ethical, effective and efficient information management; and advice on the relationship between forensic practitioners and bereaved families and communities.

Following the International Conference, the ICRC established a forensic unit to help implement the recommendations worldwide. Since its inception, the forensic unit has witnessed a sustained increase in the application of forensic medical sciences to the search for The Missing and has observed the following trends:

- Growing awareness and understanding of the tragedy of The Missing in armed conflicts and catastrophes;
- Growing recognition of the importance of proper management and identification of the dead in armed conflicts and catastrophes;
- Growing needs for experienced forensic practitioners for investigations into The Missing;
- Incorporation of recommendations from the 2003 International Conference on The Missing into international standards and national legal and institutional frameworks related to The Missing;
- Awareness of the need for sustainable local forensic capacity to investigate The Missing;
- A role-shift from medicolegal practitioners (i.e. coroner, medical examiner, forensic doctor) towards multidisciplinary forensic teams in the recovery and identification of The Missing;
- Growing reliance on forensic DNA analysis;
- Demands for professional standards of best practice and quality assurance and control from practitioners and institutions involved in investigations into The Missing;
- Increased incorporation of investigative practices regarding
- The Missing into scientific literature, research and training; and
- Growing expectations from bereaved families and the general public for swift and positive results from forensic investigations into The Missing.

These trends pose challenges and inherent opportunities for the forensic community, including:

- Helping to meet growing needs worldwide for forensic practitioners, institutions, and service providers for investigations into The Missing. These should conform to standards of professional best practice, quality assurance and control required for these investigations. Local capacity building and ownership should be prioritized;
- Empowering communication, coordination and cooperation, at regional and worldwide levels, between forensic practitioners, institutions and service providers involved in and available for investigations into The Missing;
- Supporting swift access to indispensable forensic know-how, technology and tools by practitioners and institutions operating in under-resourced contexts; and
- Sustained efforts in public awareness raising about the role, scope, value and limitations of forensic sciences applied to investigations into The Missing.

The clarification of the whereabouts and fate of The Missing in armed conflicts and catastrophes is a humanitarian priority that requires a global and concerted effort, including from the forensic community. Based on trends observed and lessons learned, the ICRC offers recommendations for addressing the challenges identified in this paper and also for building on the opportunities which these challenges offer to the forensic



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community.

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