



Physical Anthropology Section – 2009

H51 Death Investigation for Anthropologists: Examining an Alternative Role for Forensic Anthropologists in Medical Examiner's and Coroner's Offices

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn how Forensic Anthropologists can use their training in alternative or dual roles at Coroner's or Medical Examiner's Offices and how Coroners and

Medical Examiners can benefit from having an anthropologist at their offices. Attendees will also learn what the typical role of the Medicolegal Death Investigator entails.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by demonstrating various ways that Forensic Anthropologists can use their training in alternative professions.

The purpose of this presentation is to demonstrate how forensic anthropologists can use their training in alternative or dual roles at coroner's or medical examiner's offices. Specifically, the author will focus on the typical role of a medicolegal death investigator, and illustrate what anthropologists should expect when entering into a career as a death investigator. Additionally, medical examiners will be informed how they can benefit from hiring forensic anthropologists in various roles in their offices.

The relationship between the pathologist and the forensic anthropologist has become vital in multiple medical examiner's and coroner's offices around the United States. These medical examiners and coroners have seen the added benefit of having a forensic anthropologist on staff in their offices, and have hired anthropologists to supplement their staffs. Unfortunately, medical examiners and coroners often have problems justifying a full-time anthropology position and have begun to hire forensic anthropologists in other areas within their offices.

Furthermore, the current popularity of forensic sciences in the media has caused students to enter forensic related programs at an increased rate. Therefore, the number of forensic anthropology students has reached an all time high while Anthropology positions at academic institutions have only slightly increased. As a result, current and future forensic anthropologists must investigate alternative career options if they wish to find employment in a related field. Medical examiner's offices offer several potential employment options for the anthropologist, including autopsy technician, compliance officer, photographer, and death investigator.

This presentation will focus specifically on the role of the medicolegal death investigator and how anthropologists can use their training in this role. The death investigator serves as the front line in medical examiner's and coroner's offices, investigating all cases that are reported and determining which ones will be accepted for examination. Tasks of medicolegal death investigators include performing scene examinations, collecting evidence that is directly related to the body, obtaining medical and social histories on decedents from family members and friends, and any other information that may help the pathologist to determine the cause and manner of death. Medicolegal death investigators come from a myriad of backgrounds, and they are expected to have a basic knowledge in medicine, medications, local legislation, and forensic sciences.

The experiences of working as a medicolegal death investigator and anthropologist at a medical examiner's office in a large urban area of New Jersey, covering four counties, are discussed. In 2007, 4,689 cases were reported and investigated by a 24-hour staff of 13 investigators. Of these cases, 1,825 were accepted and 1,249 were autopsied. From all the reported cases of 2007, manner of death included natural (3721), accidental (508), suicide (123), homicide (207), undetermined (30) and other types of cases (100). The other types of cases handled include non-human remains (18), cases transferred out of the jurisdiction (66), fetuses (14) and body parts (2).

In addition, the continuing education opportunities available to anthropologists who are interested in pursuing a career in medicolegal death investigation are discussed. A wide range of short courses are offered by numerous agencies throughout the United States providing the basic knowledge in Death Investigation. Training, publications, and other potential areas of continuing education will also be highlighted.

Anthropologists working as medicolegal death investigators have the unique experience of handling the typical death investigator cases and any anthropology cases from the initial stages of scene investigation. This allows anthropologists a multi-dimensional perspective into the cases that they handle both as an investigator and a forensic anthropologist. Additionally, the medical examiner or coroner will greatly benefit by having a forensic anthropologist on staff, even if they are not able to justify having that person in a full-time forensic anthropology position.

Medicolegal Death Investigation, Forensic Anthropology, Medical Examiner's Office