



Physical Anthropology Section – 2010

H121 The Podrinje Identification Project: A Dedicated Mortuary Facility for the Missing From Srebrenica

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The goal of this presentation is to inform attendees of the limitations of traditional identification methods and the importance of a DNA-led system in a large-scale identification project.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing information that will add to the understanding and capabilities of the forensic science field to deal with large scale identification projects.

Exhumations of victims from the Srebrenica massacre began in 1996 by multiple international teams with varying mandates and little coordination. In response, the International Commission on Missing Persons established the Podrinje Identification Project (PIP) in 1999 and built a facility for the systematic examination and identification of recovered mortal remains.

Until the first “blind” DNA match on November 16, 2001, the PIP had achieved only 222 identifications. Fifty-one were classical identifications based on excellent circumstantial evidence and the remaining 171 cases were presumptive identifications with subsequent confirmation through DNA testing by out-of-country laboratories. All of these identifications were virtually complete bodies recovered from primary graves.

Classical identifications were further attempted with the aid of photos of clothing and personal effects presented to the families of the missing. The “Book of Photos II” project collected 2,702 photos relating to 483 exhumed complete bodies from primary mass graves. Two hundred fifty copies of the book were distributed by specially trained teams across the country, and families were requested to view the book for possible recognition of items. In total, 2,767 family members responded, representing about 4,000 missing persons. Of 69 recognized cases, 44 (30%) were excluded based on negative antemortem- postmortem comparison and only 17 (less than 15%) were positively confirmed by DNA testing.

It became clear early in the identification process that classical methods of identification, including the use of dental records, medical records, and biological profiles resulting from the anthropological analysis of remains, were inadequate to determine the identity of the recovered mortal remains. There are several reasons that classical identification of the victims from the fall of Srebrenica is particularly problematic. These include the lack of antemortem information, the lack of associated clothing and personal effects, the similar demographic composition of missing persons, and the very large number of individuals. Moreover, the majority of mortal remains from Srebrenica are disarticulated and/or commingled due to various taphonomic factors, especially as the result of the creation of secondary mass graves in a deliberate attempt to hide evidence. Natural dispersion occurred in many cases when individuals were not buried, which included scattering by weather conditions, rivers, and animal scavenging. These circumstances have proven challenging not only for the identification process, but also in determination of a cause of death. In almost 30% of cases, a definitive cause of death cannot be determined due to missing body parts and/or post-mortem damage.

With the adoption of a large-scale DNA-led identification system, the PIP has identified more than 5,000 missing persons to date. Final identifications are DNA-based but include consideration of all available evidence such as place of last sighting/site of recovery, associated clothing and personal effects and antemortem/postmortem comparison of biological attributes.

The PIP comprises a range of professionals: a project manager, a team leader, case managers, a criminologist, a pathologist, and anthropologists. All of these individuals have specific roles in the identification process, and each case file (representing a missing person) follows a series of stages as different components of the case are completed. This presentation will illustrate the process of identification from receipt of a DNA match report to final identification.

Physical Anthropology Examination, Pathology, Srebrenica