



Physical Anthropology Section – 2010

H68 The Scientific Working Group for Forensic Anthropology

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about the creation, goals, and current efforts of the Scientific Working Group for Forensic Anthropology (SWGANTH).

This presentation will impact the forensic anthropology community by presenting draft procedural guidelines developed by the Scientific Working Group for Forensic Anthropology in an open forum for the purpose of eliciting comment and discussion prior to finalization.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Department of Defense Central Identification Laboratory (DOD CIL) co-sponsored the creation of the Scientific Working Group for Forensic Anthropology, or SWGANTH. The 20-member Board consists of professionals from the forensic anthropological community invited by the sponsors to represent a broad spectrum of expertise and jurisdictional involvement.

The charter of the SWGANTH is to identify and recommend "best practice" within the forensic anthropology discipline. The SWGANTH is not a regulatory board with any formal coercive authority. Rather, the SWGANTH aims to develop consensus guidelines for the discipline of forensic anthropology, and to disseminate those guidelines to the broader forensic community. To this end, the SWGANTH is attempting to identify and codify existing standards, or, where clear standards don't exist, to formulate and establish them. The SWGANTH has created committees, which are populated by United States and international forensic anthropologists, to examine targeted issues for the purpose of identifying what is best practice today and what paths should be followed in the future.

For the purpose of the Scientific Working Group for Forensic Anthropology, forensic anthropology is succinctly defined as: *The application of anthropological methods, techniques, and theory to matters pertinent to civil or criminal law.* This definition is inclusive, not exclusive. Historically, at least in the United States, these "methods, techniques, and theory" of forensic anthropology have been drawn almost exclusively from the anthropological sub-disciplines of human osteology and archaeology, and the "matters pertinent to civil or criminal law" have been largely confined to: (1) the detection of buried human remains; (2) the recovery of buried or scattered human remains; (3) the generation of a biological profile from skeletal remains for the purpose of individual identification; and, (4) the interpretation of hard-tissue trauma. Certainly, while these aspects remain the core of Forensic Anthropology, this historical view has too often served to restrict the scope of the discipline.

But times are changing, and the field of forensic anthropology is at last emerging as a full-fledged discipline in its own right. Concomitant with this emergence is the rapid, and in many respects, uncontrolled, expansion of the role and scope of forensic anthropology. This expanding scope occurs at the same time as there is a growing acknowledgment by forensic anthropologists of the need for standardization of the procedures and protocols currently in practice— both in the "traditional" framework of forensic anthropology as well as in the expanding roles that the discipline is radiating into. Gone, or at least waning, are the halcyon days of individuals employing idiosyncratic techniques and methods that lead to findings by fiat. Already, many anthropologists are employed in laboratories where they are held to regulatory,



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statutory, and institutional guidelines that leave little room for deviation, and especially in light of the recent report by the National Academy of Sciences, forensic anthropologists in all venues will need to demonstrate adherence to established and standardized protocols.

This paradigm shift of forensic anthropology should not be viewed negatively. It is a healthy evolution, and one, arguably, long overdue. The challenge facing its practitioners is not (or at least should not be) how to arrest the change, or failing to do that, to forestall it as long as possible, but rather the challenge should be to direct the field's development into the most professional, efficient, and profitable pathway.

This symposium will review the SWGANTH's current efforts to meet this challenge and will present summaries of draft guidelines to the forensic anthropology community for review and discussion prior to finalization. The summaries will be presented in four groups, and will conclude with an overview of the SWGANTH.

Forensic Anthropology, Scientific Working Group, Professional Standards