



Odontology Section – 2011

F48 Homicide in South Carolina - NCIC and NDIR

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have an understanding of the value of detailed gathering of antemortem data and input into two FBI databases: (1) Missing Persons file, begun in 1975, of the National Crime Information Center; and (2) National Dental Image/Information Repository, established May 2005.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by reviewing a criminal case and how forensic odontology can contribute to resolution. As with any database, the usefulness is enhanced with proper data input.

On September 3, 2008 a 31 year-old Registered Nurse, Aretha "Maria" Fernandez, finished her shift at a nursing home in the city of Union, South Carolina leaving to meet her boyfriend, Jamal Good. They had resided together with their five year old son at a home owned by Good's father. Recently, they had separated and Maria was looking to purchase her own home.

She was reported missing to the Union County Sheriff's department three days later by her mother. The investigating detective entered an initial report into the FBI Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) Missing Persons file in the National Crime Information Center (NCIC).

The boyfriend, an independent self-employed truck driver, drove routes along the east coast. He, or anyone in his family, refused to speak to the Sheriff's department without an attorney present from the very beginning of the investigation, raising suspicions. The case had potential to go across jurisdictional boundaries.

In October 2008, the NCIC system generated a \$.K message to the originating agency regarding the case. A \$.K message is a reminder that additional information is needed for the file. The detective, along with a mentor, determined that dental records may be the missing information. Ms. Fernandez had recently been seeking to improve her life, upgrading her education from a licensed practical nurse to a registered nurse just one month before she went missing. She had also undergone orthodontic treatment, completing the treatment one year prior. The orthodontist attempted NCIC dental characteristics coding using the NCIC Missing Person File Data Collection Entry Guide. Unfortunately, the system would not take the coding.

Requesting the assistance of a trained odontologist, the investigating detective obtained additional records from Maria's general dentist. Recoding the dental characteristics, plus digitizing the necessary records for the National Dental Image/Information Repository (NDIR), prepared the data for input to the FBI's databases. The NDIR, established May 2005, simplifies retrieval of dental information to facilitate the analysis of reports generated by NCIC. When a possible match between Missing Person files and Unidentified Person files by computerized query between the databases in NCIC occurs, a \$.M message is sent to the originating agencies. Comparing cases between agencies located in different jurisdictions, the NDIR speeds up the process of identifications. The NDIR records include: (1) the Missing and Wanted Person Submission Form; (2) digitized NCIC record; (3) NCIC Person Dental Condition Worksheet; (4) NCIC Person Dental Report Form; (5) digitized treating dentist's treatment records; (6) digital scans of all available radiographs; and (7) miscellaneous records such as scanned dental models or photographs.

In this particular case, additional challenges due to a software glitch in the state's feeds to NCIC terminals again thwarted efforts to upload to the FBI database. The NCIC dental characteristics codes are V, I, X, M, O, D, F, and L. At the terminal, the operator saw the codes A, F, G, I, P, X and numbers 0-9 for the tooth surfaces.

Meanwhile, investigations continued into the mystery of Maria's whereabouts. Her remains were found January 7, 2009 near train tracks in a wooded area in Union County. A utility worker looking for fallen lines came across her partial skeletal remains. She was identified through dental records. Cause of death could not be determined and was officially declared unknown. A pathologist testified that there were no signs of trauma to the bones.

Jamal Good was arrested outside his home on February 9, 2009 and charged with the murder of Maria Fernandez. He was held without bail due to flight risk. The trial took place in December, 2009. The jury deliberated less than 45 minutes, returning a murder conviction. He was sentenced to life in prison without any possibility of parole.

Missing Person, NCIC, NDIR