



Pathology Biology Section – 2011

G98 The Identification of French Victims in the Massive Earthquake on January 12, 2010 in Haiti

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The goal of this presentation is to give attendees a clear understanding of France's structure and procedures in terms of identification of its nationals in the event of a major natural disaster and to demonstrate that the international response is as efficient and effective as it is at a national level.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showing the successful collaboration between a forensic scientist and a first response rescue team. To illustrate this, the French national team of identification was followed on site at Port-Au-Prince from January 13, 2010 until April 1, 2010. It also demonstrates that an early intervention is key to optimizing the effectiveness of the identification process and to achieving the overall success of the operation.

The earthquake that struck Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince caused more than 200,000 deaths. The major contributing factors to such high casualties were primarily its incredible strength and secondly the instability of the existing infrastructure. The challenges that had to be overcome were the significant increase of sanitary requirements and the issue of corpses' management. Identifying such a high number of victims proved extremely difficult firstly because of such a large volume of corpses and secondly because of their high levels of depreciation. The success of this operation was only made possible due to a thorough preparation combined with a structured and systematic approach.

In response to similar events, France has a national DVI team (Unité Nationale d'Identification des Victimes de Catastrophes – UNIVC) since 1992. It was established by the Criminal Research Institute of the National Gendarmerie (IRCGN). The team is made up of specialists from the Criminal Identification Department who are able to be deployed on site very quickly and are trained to be adaptable and responsive to any given situation.

Since 2006, authorities based in the French island of Martinique, in the West Indies, have been focusing on contingency and emergency plans due to the island's major exposure to natural risks and its remote location. These revised response procedures were put into practice for the first time in Haiti in 2009 to such great effect that it has subsequently brought about modifications of the national strategy (plan ORSEC). This strategy encompasses a forensic scientist, with expertise in mass deceased management, as part of the initial first aid response team.

The first evaluation reported at least 70,000 deceased in PORT-AU- PRINCE 24 hours after the earthquake. The police's chief of the United Nations and the Haitian Prime Minister, who were actually themselves survivors of the disaster, were immediately contacted to organize the clearance and logistic requirements, as well as the coordination of the mass burial of corpses in common graves commencing 36 hours after the earthquake.

Communication was a key factor in this operation not only with the population, to dispel the myth that corpses in a disaster can cause the rapid spread of diseases, but also with the international nursing staff to reiterate that sanitary precautions in the movement of bodies.

The second major objective was to perform an accurate census of the deceased French nationals by locating and collating their position at the time for the purposes of identification and repatriation to families. This was achieved by setting up an "antemortem" unit at the French embassy for the registration of missing persons and reported fatalities.

Between 72 and 96 hours, 30 names were indexed. Survivors were then contacted and advised on the best practices for the storage of the deceased prior to burial. These instructions also gave details on how to preserve vital evidence i.e. ensuring personal effects of the corpses were not removed, drawing up an accurate map to locate corpses, collecting local and national coordinate.

As a result, all French deceased nationals (33 of approximately 1,200 present) were identified by the end of March 2010 and placed in a temporary mortuary at the French embassy with thanks to the close cooperation of the American and Canadian DVI.

Identification, Mass Disaster, Earthquake