



Physical Anthropology Section – 2011

H16 Involvement of Forensic Anthropologists in the National Unidentified and Missing Persons System (NamUs)

Bruce E. Anderson, PhD, Forensic Science Center, Office of the Medical Examiner, 2825 East District Street, Tucson, AZ 85714; Elizabeth A. Murray, PhD, College of Mount Saint Joseph, Department of Biology, 5701 Delhi Road, Cincinnati, OH 45233-1670; Susan M.T. Myster, PhD, Hamline University, MB 196, 1536 Hewitt Avenue, Saint Paul, MN 55104; and Jennifer C. Love, PhD, Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences, 1885 Old Spanish Trail, Houston, TX 77054*

After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the ways in which forensic anthropologists can engage with NamUs, and learn more about the current scope of the unidentified persons problem in the United States, particularly as it relates to the field of forensic anthropology.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by communicating to forensic anthropology professionals the ways in which they can become involved with NamUs, reporting on unidentified skeletal remains of forensic interest in various regions of the country that have not been entered into NamUs; and demonstrating basic NamUs case entry for unidentified persons.

Throughout the past decade, forensic professionals have increasingly become aware of the need to create a system that retains and integrates records of unidentified persons and missing persons throughout the United States. Out of these and other realizations, and under the auspices of the Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, evolved the "President's DNA Initiative" in 2003, and the "Identifying the Missing Summit" in 2005. Later, in 2007, the initial phases of what was to become the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) developed. The scope of the missing and unidentified problem is enormous and has been referred to "the nation's silent mass disaster." Based on records collected in 2004 by the Office of Justice Programs, it was estimated that as many as 40,000 unidentified dead may exist in the United States today. Some of these unidentified persons currently exist only as records; other unidentified decedents lie buried in public cemeteries throughout the United States without benefit of tissue sampling for DNA analysis. Additional sets of unidentified skeletal remains sit in boxes on shelves in police property rooms, county morgues, museums, and anthropology departments. Many of these skeletons, though forensically significant, have dates of discovery that preceded modern anthropological identification methods, and certainly predated the use of DNA technology.

The advent of the NamUs system, and the resources and technology it provides, allows the medicolegal system a new and dynamic way to pursue identification of unknown persons. The responsibility of forensic anthropologists, in collaboration with the coroners and/or medical examiners with whom they consult, is to ensure that skeletal remains within the regions in which they practice are afforded this new technology, including the fully-funded DNA analyses associated with this national identification effort. Those who have been entrusted with

remains by coroners and medical examiners are empowered to actively participate in the identification process of the individuals in their charge. To this end, it is essential that forensic professionals become familiar with the NamUs system, use it in their casework, encourage the use of the NamUs system by their colleagues, and that those involved in forensic anthropology education begin to introduce this tool to their students.

This presentation will provide an overview of the NamUs system, with special emphasis on its application to the identification of unknown skeletal remains. Case data entry will be demonstrated, means of obtaining free DNA analyses will be outlined, and ways that forensic anthropologists can become more involved with NamUs will be discussed.

NamUs, Unidentified Persons, Forensic Anthropology