



Physical Anthropology Section – 2011

H17 Diversification: Evolving Professional Roles for the Forensic Anthropologist in the Medicolegal System

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After attending this presentation, attendees understand the different professional roles forensic anthropologists fill in a medical examiner/coroner office. In light of the current economic climate, the trend to diversify professional duties is expected to rise.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting the additional professional roles forensic anthropologists currently serve in the medicolegal system. This trend presents unique opportunities for cross-training in other forensic specialty areas thereby increasing overall marketability for the forensic anthropologist.

The role of a Forensic Anthropologist (FA) in the Medical Examiner/Coroner (ME/C) Office is an important one, but for many offices, the work load of such a position is not enough to justify a full-time FA staff member. In the past, a FA was used as an external consultant providing services on an "as needed" basis to the ME/C. This proved to be problematic in some cases due to chain of custody-related issues and the long amount of time required for analysis and report completion if the consultant was not local. Over the last 15 years, this mode of operation has evolved with many larger offices bringing a FA on staff to provide case analysis as needed, while also filling an additional role(s) in the office. This arrangement has proven advantageous for the ME/C in that they have a specialist on their staff that is available at any time for FA consults – to include trauma consults with the pathologist during the autopsy examination. In addition, the FA is also trained in office policy/procedures (especially those related to the handling of evidence). The broad educational background of a FA lends itself to other roles in the office to include, but not limited to, medicolegal death investigator, DNA coordinator, identification coordinator, mass disaster planning management, director of photography, trace/evidence/latent print examiner, autopsy technician and forensic database administrator. In this way the FA also builds important working relationships with the entire ME/C staff, police and crime scene personnel, and other investigative agencies. These relationships also lead to greater education and understanding of forensic anthropology for outside agencies. As part of the ME/C staff, the FA is immediately available to assist with the case from the point of the scene investigation/recovery. In the majority of cases, this involvement directly leads to the greatest recovery of skeletal and trace evidence from the scene which is typically correlated with successful case resolution.

This presentation will discuss the current, diversified roles filled by FAs in the medicolegal system and the advantages this provides for

professional enrichment, new training opportunities, certification options and diverse employment opportunities. Stresses associated with the overall unpredictability of the operational movement at an ME/C Office and the demanding workload requirements diversification of duties presents will also be explored. The roles and responsibilities of several FAs currently serving in ME/C offices will be presented and discussed. In addition, the roles of several FAs currently employed in professional forensic positions outside of the ME/C system will also be presented to illustrate the range of opportunities available to the FA.

Diversification of professional duties is a trend that is on the rise, in part, due to the current economic climate. This trend should not be looked on as a negative in that professional focus is being split, but as a positive opportunity to learn and apply additional forensic skills. As will be shown, this trend presents the FA with unique opportunities to diversify their forensic proficiency into other areas and increase overall marketability.

Forensic Anthropology, Medicolegal System, Professional Roles