



Pathology Biology Section - 2012

G86 Crossing Through the Borderland — Fatalities Due to Attempted Illegal Crossings Between the Mexico and United States Border Along the Rio Grande River in Southwest Texas 2007-2011

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After attending the presentation, attendees will be able to: (1) recognize the hazards faced by illegal immigrants while attempting to cross the border; (2) become familiar with federal laws regarding immigration and the scope and role of the United States Border Patrol; and, (3) recognize the most common causes and manners of deaths in those immigrants who die while illegally crossing.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by shedding a light on the extent of the problem of illegal crossers in regard to identification, public health issues and the financial burden placed upon the counties in which they cross.

Thousands of immigrants from Central and South America, as well as Cuba, China, and other countries, attempt to illegally cross the Texas-Mexico border every year. Many are successful. Many are apprehended. A significant number die—succumbing to drowning, heat stroke, trauma, and natural death. Due to the vast amount of ranchland along the southwestern border of Texas, many succumb to the effects of the environment as they walk for days in extreme environmental conditions without adequate food, water, or other supplies.

During a five-year period from January 2007 through December of 2009, the Webb County Medical Examiner's Office has examined the remains of over two hundred illegal crossers. Although the most common cause of death in the earlier years was drowning, the majority of deaths that are seen now are due to heatstroke and dehydration. Other causes seen include rattlesnake envenomation, blunt force injuries (pedestrians and motor vehicle drivers and passengers), and natural deaths due to heart disease.

Not all illegal crossers who die are sent for autopsy. The Webb County Medical Examiner's Office services seven additional counties that are under the jurisdiction of Justices of the Peace. Because of the cost associated with sending these individuals for autopsy, many are identified based on rudimentary means and returned to their families or buried at the counties' expense in pauper graves. Although Texas law mandates that all unidentified deaths have DNA submitted for analysis, compliance with this law is low in the smaller rural counties.

All unidentified crossers that are sent for autopsy are radiographed, photographed, and autopsied, including dental charting. Information is entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) and samples for DNA analysis are sent to the University of North Texas Health Science Center. Skeletal remains are sent for complete anthropological analysis by a forensic anthropologist.

Open communication with the Mexican Consulate's offices as well as the other consulate offices is imperative. During this period, the office has experienced between a 65% to 75% identification rate. Identified Mexican nationals are returned home at the expense of the Mexican government. Others do not fare as well as the funds are not available to assist the families. Both unidentified crossers, as well as those identified but unclaimed, are buried in a pauper's grave at the expense of the respective county. If a decedent is identified at a later date through DNA analysis, the decedent can be disinterred at the family's expense.

New and pending legislation, especially with health care reform, may change the numbers of crossers that are attempting to illegally gain entry into the United States. In the meantime, educating this population on the dangers associated with illegal crossing must continue and use all means in attempting to identify them so that they may be returned home must be used.

Border, Illegal, Crosser