



## Physical Anthropology Section - 2012

### H56 Working Towards Unified Forensic Protocols for Mexico

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about the problematic issues concerning the unidentified dead in Mexico, particularly the problem of deceased migrants and the efforts to achieve better management and eventual identification of their remains.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by creating a better understanding of the challenges of forensic human identification in a context of large-scale migration and of the importance of regionally standardized protocols and centralized data management, and of the ICRC's endeavours to support authorities in developing such tools.

Thousands of persons from various - mainly Central American - countries enter Mexico every year to cross the country and migrate to the United States and Canada. Many die on the way, due to accidents, environmental hazards, and attacks and killings by armed groups and drug trafficking gangs.

Having entered the country without any documentation or bureaucratic trace, the identification of these persons poses a major problem. While the individual medicolegal services around the country may have autopsy reports and information that might help identify those dead, there is so far no mechanism for exchanging this information and no standardized format. As a result, bodies usually end up as undocumented no name (NN) burials in mass graves, without possibility of further identification and restitution to their loved ones. Families looking for a missing person, on the other hand, do not have a clear contact point on where to report a missing person and where to start their search. They depend on informal networks, and those who can afford it often end up travelling from one morgue to the other in order to see if they can recognize the bodies. Only in a few high profile cases, which created a lot of publicity and thus alerted families, who in turn contacted the authorities in the respective countries, was it possible to identify a large majority of the bodies, such as in the case of the Tamaulipas massacre.

Mexico has 32 different state medicolegal systems which depend on different structures, each one with varying resources, and working protocols. In 2010 the ICRC sponsored a first national meeting of Medico Legal Services (SEMEFOs - Servicios de Medicina Forense), in which the lack of standard protocols and centralization of information was identified as one of the main challenges in the identification of the dead in Mexico.

In order to tackle this problem, the Mexican SEMEFOs, in close cooperation with the General Prosecutors Office and with the support and advice of the ICRC, have started to develop a unified protocol for the management, documentation and identification of the dead in Mexico. The protocol consists of a manual and standardized data collection forms. It takes into account the international recommendations on management of dead bodies and forensic human identification while being adapted to the reality of the country. Pilot projects have been started to digitize the information collected in these unified formats into a standardized electronic database (the AMPM, provided by the ICRC), for later integration into a nation- or region-wide centralized system. Unified and centralized information, both on unidentified bodies and on missing persons is easily accessible for those who require it, and adherence to standards of best practice will be an important step towards decreasing the number of bodies being buried without names, and will help bring answers to those families trying to find out about the fate of their loved ones.

**Protocols, Migrants, ICRC**