



Physical Anthropology Section - 2012

H60 Advances in Victim Identification in Colombia

Elizabeth A. DiGangi, PhD, ICITAP-Colombia, Calle 125 #19-89, Office 401, Bogota, COLOMBIA; and Maria Morcillo, MD, and Jairo H. Vivas Diaz, MD, National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences, Carrera 7A No. 12-61, Bogota, COLOMBIA*

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how victim identification is achieved in Colombia through a multidisciplinary team approach and how the construction of a new human identification center aims to streamline the identification process by increasing training, implementing research as a major goal, and introducing country-wide protocols into the process.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating how a country with serious human rights and victim identification challenges is attempting to meet its responsibilities through practices geared towards scientifically accurate identifications using a team approach.

Colombia has been ensconced in internal conflict with illegally armed groups for the past 40 years which has resulted in tens of thousands of victims, many of whom are buried in clandestine graves, buried by the authorities as John or Jane Does, or interred by family members in plots not reported to the government. Additionally, human rights abuses exist in situations where the armed forces kill poor civilians so they can pose them as armed combatants, increasing their kill quota for those illegal groups.

Eighteen years ago, the Colombian government began hiring anthropologists to help in the effort towards identification of the victims from the different conflicts. Today there are four different government agencies that employ forensic anthropologists with a total of about 50 practicing anthropologists. Each agency has a slightly different function and protocols in use for human identification and field exhumations differ between the agencies. Efforts have been made over the past few years to streamline the process between the agencies in terms of viewing the skeletal analysis as a forensic autopsy, which involves a team of a pathologist, anthropologist, and odontologist who examine the remains. The anthropologist constructs the biological profile and analyzes the skeleton for taphonomy while the odontologist analyzes the jaws and teeth. The pathologist and anthropologist work in tandem to analyze pathology and trauma. The pathologist ultimately determines the cause and manner of death, when possible, and issues the death certificate. Once analysis has been completed, a report will be generated that is signed by all individuals involved with the analysis. At that point, DNA samples are processed.

After this analysis process, a dedicated team works on determining whether or not an identification has been made based on the forensic autopsy report and DNA report. This overall teamwork approach has been adopted by the two agencies currently involved in skeletal analysis, but there is still much to be done in terms of training and protocol development.

The Human Identification Center is a joint undertaking between ICITAP-Colombia, the Colombian Attorney General's office (CTI-Fiscalia), and the Colombian national morgue (National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences). It will be the first center of its kind in Colombia and possibly Latin America. The center has been developed to process the large number of human remains that derive from clandestine burials and other illegal methods of body disposal. While laboratories doing this type of work already exist in Colombia as mentioned above, the backlog is typically 12 months or more, the labs are short on space, and the workers are taught within the culture of the agencies that quantity is more important than quality. The center's goal is to combat all of these issues.

The Center is a morgue that has been designed specifically for forensic autopsies of skeletal remains. In addition to the forensic autopsy floor, the center includes a bone pulverization lab for DNA purposes. Further, three key goals of the center are protocol development, training, and research. In addition to casework, each scientist on staff will be expected to generate research and participate in the training of their colleagues on rotation at the center. Further, the Center will be compliant with the ISO 17025 accreditation standard, the first laboratory analyzing human remains in Colombia to do so. The collaborative effort of the different government agencies involved and the different scientific disciplines involved in creating the center demonstrates a renewal in the commitment that the Colombian government has towards identifying victims of the Colombian conflict.

Colombia, Victim Identification, Human Identification Center