



Physical Anthropology Section - 2012

H65 Roles of the Forensic Anthropologist at the New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a greater understanding of the growing role of the forensic anthropologist in medical examiner/coroner systems with particular attention to anthropology at the New York City's Office of Chief Medical Examiner (OCME-NYC).

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing the expanding role of the forensic anthropologist and demonstrate the holistic approach needed in forensic anthropology casework.

T. Dale Stewart classically defined forensic anthropology as "that branch of physical anthropology which, for forensic purposes, deals with the identification of more or less skeletonized remains known to be, or suspected of being, human" (Stewart 1979:xi). By this definition, the forensic anthropologist is a specialist in the reconstruction of the biological profile from skeletal material. Over the past 30 years following Stewart's definition there has been a paradigm shift in the conceptual framework by which the forensic anthropologist operates with specific reference to forensic taphonomy, forensic archaeology, and trauma analysis (Dirkmaat et al. 2008). This shift has increased the need for anthropological analyzes in the medical examiner's setting and expanded the role of forensic anthropology. As noted by Austin and Fulginiti (2008), anthropologists within the medicolegal system frequently perform roles in addition to standard forensic anthropological analyzes. The Forensic Anthropology Unit at New York City's Office of Chief Medical Examiner (OCME-NYC) has developed the largest dedicated staff of forensic anthropologists outside of the Department of Defense and currently consists of eight full-time anthropologists. In this setting, the roles and responsibilities of the forensic anthropologist are diverse and span into several operational areas beyond the classic laboratory based analyzes, specifically as they relate to field operations and decedent identification.

With expertise in archaeological techniques and methods, forensic anthropologists can assist medicolegal investigators with scene investigations where decomposed, skeletonized, fragmentary, burned, or buried remains are discovered. An archaeological approach to crime scene documentation is used to thoroughly and efficiently assist with the search and recovery of human remains and associated evidence. This approach also provides contextual details that may contribute to a better understanding of the crime scene. Scene maps provide a valuable addition to the case file and at the OCME-NYC, hand drawn maps are produced but specialized mapping technologies (GPS, total station, etc.) may also be employed when appropriate.

Forensic anthropologists at the OCME-NYC are also taking an increased role in the identification of decedents. No unidentified case is released for burial without an anthropological estimation of age. Analysis of sex, ancestry, and stature are performed as needed. Furthermore, electronic data are compiled and entered into national missing/unidentified databases such as the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) and the National Crime Information Center (NCIC).

Outside of daily operations, the forensic anthropologists are a critical component of OCME's disaster response team. In response to a disaster, the forensic anthropologist may fill standard roles such as mapping the scene of a mass fatality incident or assisting at the anthropology section of the disaster mortuary. Non-traditional roles are also evident in a disaster response. For instance, the forensic anthropologist may be involved with the Family Assistance Center, dissemination of information to family members, review of antemortem information, and coordination of the identification process. The forensic anthropologist may also take a leadership role with the body recovery effort. Similar roles are currently being assumed by the OCME's forensic anthropologists with the on-going efforts surrounding the World Trade Center disaster, both in field recovery operations and identification efforts.

It is apparent from the current work performed at the OCME-NYC, as well as by the increased employment opportunities over the past decade for forensic anthropologists that forensic anthropology has grown beyond the scope of its classic definition. As the result of this growth, the required education/training and qualifications of those pursuing a career as a forensic anthropologist is also changing. A comprehensive anthropological background is necessary considering that forensic anthropology draws methods and theory from physical anthropology, archaeology and cultural anthropology. Forensic anthropologists benefit from this broad training and expertise within these sub-fields of anthropology.

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