



D49 Missing Persons or Disposable Persons? Perils and Pitfalls in the Investigation of Unidentified Bodies

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn of the methods in attempting to identify skeletal remains and also of the obstacles faced when working on a cold case with multiple unidentified victims.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by familiarizing attendees with steps that can be taken in an attempt to identify victims in a cold case, and discussing the delays that can occur when wrong theories are made.

This presentation will review the efforts made to identify four homicide victims, a woman and child, then two additional children, whose skeletal remains were found in two separate barrels approximately 100 yards apart, in a forest in New Hampshire in November 1985 and May 2000, and the erroneous assumptions that were made regarding several aspects of the investigation. Presumptions regarding the value of the DNA profiles that were obtained from the victims, the usefulness of additional scientific testing, the interest of media organizations, and the capacity of technology to match missing persons to unidentified remains were not accurate. This presentation will also highlight the numerous government and non-government agencies and resources that can aid a medicolegal jurisdiction working to give a name to unidentified remains.

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand some of the challenges associated with reopening a cold case, in which the crime occurred and the bodies were discovered prior to the founding of the State Medical Examiner's office and prior to the use of computers to track evidence and store information. Difficulty locating all the skeletal remains from the four victims was encountered due to a variety of bones being sent to different labs, agencies, and authorities for analysis.

The limitations of utilizing mtDNA test results for identification purposes will be discussed, including that mtDNA profiles are not used in criminal databases, the inability to confirm there is a relationship between victims with matching mtDNA profiles, and that DNA profiles of unidentified remains cannot be compared to DNA profiles of known criminals to search for a familial match.

Scientific testing of these remains resumed within the past few years. A hair analysis of the adult victim was performed in an effort to determine what part of the country she had been in during the months preceding her death. The results were inconclusive.

Participants at this presentation will learn that, while a homicide case involving four victims, three of them children, would seem compelling in terms of public interest, unidentified remains are not as noteworthy to the media as cases of missing persons. Efforts to publicize New Hampshire's cold case have been statewide but were not picked up on the national level. While missing persons have families and friends who use the media in an attempt to find their loved ones, unidentified remains have no such advocates.

There are several websites that contain databases for missing persons and unidentified remains and New Hampshire's cold case is listed in some of these, including the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), a national resource for the records of missing persons and unidentified remains. It was originally believed these databases were capable of matching missing person cases to unidentified remains and that the medical examiner's office would be alerted to any possible matches of the New Hampshire victims to missing persons. It was later learned the databases are not capable of making matches and the missing person section of a database must be searched manually in order to find potential matches to unidentified remains.

Unidentified, Remains, Cold