D50 John Doe — Identified Seven Years Later: A NamUs Success Story

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) and the successful 2012 identification of a John Doe who was found in 2005. At the conclusion of this presentation, attendees will be able to discuss the importance of submitting information from unidentified persons into NamUs.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting the need for medical examiners, coroners, and death investigators to input information regarding unidentified human remains into NamUs. This should result in an increased participation of this system, which should then result in an increased success rate of identifying previously unidentified human remains.

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) reports that the nation's medical examiners and coroners have an estimated 40,000 unidentified human remains cases, the majority of which have been buried or cremated before being identified. This has been named the greatest mass disaster of our time. To remedy the problem, NIJ developed NamUs, a central reporting system for unidentified human remains that is inclusive, intuitive and open to the public. NamUs is structured to allow searches for matches between missing persons and information on unidentified human remains such as skeletal profiles, dental charts, fingerprints, DNA profiles and unique scene evidence. The database also matches identified unclaimed remains with individuals reported missing within the National Missing Persons database. Those agencies whose population includes high numbers of transient individuals (vacationers, students, migrant workers, etc.) understand that casework often crosses state lines and these groups will benefit from the nationwide approach to NamUs, as highlighted in this presentation.

In 2011, the Charleston County Coroner's Office was awarded grant funds for their "Bones in Boxes" Unidentified Human Remains Project from NIJ's "Using DNA Technology to Identify the Missing" initiative. As a result of those funds, a forensic anthropologist and forensic odontologist were hired to work on cold cases involving unidentified human remains. A case study of a "John Doe" who was found in 2005 in Charleston County will be presented. At that time, investigators used many methods to try to identify the decedent without success. The case was reevaluated in 2011 and a DNA sample was submitted to the University of North Texas for analysis. The DNA profile information was then uploaded into Combines DNA Index System (CODIS) and then into State DNA Identification System (SDIS). It was then entered into National DNA Index System (NDIS), where a positive match was made after comparing the DNA to samples uploaded into the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) convicted offender DNA database. The lessons learned from this cold case, including policy changes which were implemented in the coroner's office will be discussed. The ensuing investigation, the working relationship with out-of-state agencies to confirm the decedent's identity, and the notification procedure to the legal next of kin will also be discussed.

The Charleston County Coroner's Office has subsequently been entering all data on unidentified human remains and those cases in which the remains have been identified but are unclaimed. The overall results of their grant project, including the number of remains submitted for analysis and inclusion into the NamUs system, the number of remains identified, the number of remains that have since been claimed, and other lessons learned will be discussed.

NamUs, Unidentified Remains, Identification

 ** Presenting Author*