G30 A Bus Crash With School Children in Sierre, Switzerland: Identification of the Victims

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After attending this presentation, attendees will get an overview of the identification process of the 28 Belgian victims who died in a bus crash and learn about difficulties and possible solutions. They will also get an overview of the Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) response in Switzerland.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showing how international standards and collaboration aid in the management of a mass disaster.

On March 15, 2012, at 9:15 p.m., a Belgian bus crashed head on against a highway tunnel wall near Sierre, Switzerland. Of the 54 occupants, 46 were children from two Belgium schools on their way home after a ski camp. During the vast rescue operation, the first responders faced many problems because of the confined space in the tunnel. It took time to access and extract the injured and the dead from the bus wreck, as the seats were torn away and stuffed together in the impacted front area of the bus, trapping most of the accident victims. Twenty-eight bodies were retrieved from the bus, including 22 children, four tutors, and two drivers. All bodies were numbered on the site of the accident and transported to a local mortuary with funeral cars. Some local stakeholders contemplated a visual recognition process in order to identify the victims, but the decision for a scientific identification was reached quite rapidly and a request for a Swiss DVI Team operation was issued. A visual confrontation of families and bodies was still expected to be conducted. On the morning of the 26th, the DVI Identification procedure started in the regional mortuary using local means and personnel. These first responders were then reinforced and later relieved by one Belgian and two Swiss DVI teams. All bodies and personal objects were documented (inventoried and photographed), and DNA samples were taken according to a simplified Interpol protocol. Few identifying features were present on most children, and many bodies were heavily traumatized. All bodies underwent a full body CT scan for which they had to be transported to the University Centre of Forensic Medicine of Lausanne (CURML), Switzerland. The autopsies of the drivers and a few dental exams also took place there. The Belgian DVI-Team arrived together with the families of the injured and the dead. The Belgian Team joined the Swiss investigators in order to obtain the antemortem (AM) data. The ability to approach the families in their native language was of paramount importance to obtain high-quality AM data. The presence of the families as well as the political and mass media interventions put enormous pressure on the DVI crews in order to hasten the release of the bodies. The antemortem-postmortem comparisons were performed during the second night of the event and the identifications were all based on several identifiers. A specially designed visual acknowledgement process also gave supportive information. The multidisciplinary validation of the identifications was associating a Belgian DVI-Team member, which provided a mutual endorsement of the results. All 28 victims, as well as one surviving comatose child, were identified according to international DVI procedures within two days after the accident. All bodies were then repatriated in the morning of the third day. This rapidity was only possible because of optimal circumstances (weekday, trained personnel, and rapid access to AM data) and the coordinated action of local police force, forensic pathology, Swiss and Belgian DVI Teams, and the DNA-Lab, which rendered the comparison results within eight hours after receiving the material. The CT scans of the bodies were not much used in the identification process in this case, because the combination of the other methods sufficed. The CT data did aid in the reconstructive workup, as no autopsies were performed on most victims. The rapidity of the response and identifications, however, also posed problems regarding logistics and psychological aid for the AM and PM teams.

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