



## Physical Anthropology Section - 2013

### H26 The Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner Forensic Anthropology Postdoctoral Fellowship: An Advanced Training Model for Newly Emerging Forensic Anthropologists

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about the one-year forensic anthropology postdoctoral fellowship now being offered at the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) in Tucson, Arizona.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing an example of one of the two forensic anthropology fellowship training programs currently being administered by a Diplomate of the American Board of Forensic Anthropology (D-ABFA) and working within the medical examiner/coroner system in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

As a fast-paced medical examiner's office with an elevated number of unidentified human remains, the PCOME offers an exceptional training opportunity for forensic anthropology PhDs hoping to gain practical experience within the medical examiner system. With nearly 200 anthropology consults requested each year, the PCOME exposes the postdoctoral fellow to a substantial number of cases and a variety of anthropological case types. Moreover, desert conditions, the vast number of Southwest Hispanic undocumented migrants dying within PCOME jurisdiction, and the large number of unidentified human remains cases presents a rather unique caseload. Within an average year at the PCOME, skeletonized remains cases make up a considerable percentage of anthropological consults, and thus expose the postdoctoral fellow to one of the largest caseloads of skeletonized remains within the medicolegal system. In addition, a substantial diversity in anthropological consults are requested for non-human remains, as well as for fresh, decomposed, burned, and fragmentary human remains for local residents and undocumented migrants dying within PCOME's jurisdictions. Because the PCOME performs medicolegal investigations for 11 of the 15 counties in Arizona, diversity in geographical factors, such as climate and elevation, allows the postdoctoral fellow to appreciate differences between the Sonoran Desert and mountainous regions in estimating the postmortem interval. The PCOME also recognizes its role as a training institution because of the substantial casework and is in full agreement with the Scientific Working Group in Forensic Anthropology (SWGANTH) that this casework should be utilized to offer additional training to emerging forensic anthropologists.

At the PCOME, the forensic anthropology postdoctoral fellow functions as one of two fulltime forensic anthropologists and is responsible for a majority of the anthropological exams requested by one of the six forensic pathologists in the office. Anthropology cases at the PCOME cover a wide range of responsibilities and any consultation may include: scene recovery, determination of the biological profile and postmortem interval, dental examination, assessment of skeletal trauma, sampling of skeletal tissues for DNA analysis, and positive identification through comparative medical or dental radiography. The fellow is independently responsible for all processing and analysis of casework, authors his/her own case reports in accordance with SWGANTH and ABFA recommendations, and may be called to testify as an expert witness if any cases go to trial. The PCOME believes this level of autonomy is essential in rounding out the fellow's skill set. In addition to forensic examinations, anthropologists at PCOME are responsible for entering unidentified remains cases into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs); as well as comparing the biological profile and dental information of probable undocumented migrants with a list of missing persons reports compiled by foreign consulates and non-governmental organizations. Once an unidentified body is released, the anthropologists still maintain responsibility and continue to follow up on missing person's reports and NamUs comparisons. Aside from anthropological consultations, the postdoctoral fellow may also be involved in a number of other activities, including scientific research, presentations or training within the medicolegal or local university community, and the supervision and mentorship of both undergraduate and graduate student anthropology interns.

The PCOME forensic anthropology postdoctoral fellowship provides another potential model for an advanced training program that prepares the emerging forensic anthropologist for a promising future in the field. Through the fellowship, the postdoctoral fellow gains an immeasurable amount of forensic anthropological case experience and develops leadership skills and confidence in his/her ability to perform a wide range of anthropological consultations. Furthermore, the fellowship exposes the newly emerging scientist to the role of forensic anthropology within a large, high-functioning medical examiner's office and teaches how to directly cooperate with law enforcement, death investigators, and forensic pathologists. Most importantly, the PCOME postdoctoral fellowship allows the newly emerging scientist to work directly with a board-certified forensic anthropologist while attaining postdoctoral experience that will allow for further preparation for the job market and ABFA certification.

#### Reference:

1. Pinto DC, Love JC, Derrick SM, Wiersema JM. "Forensic anthropology training model"; *Proceedings of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences*; 64<sup>th</sup> Annual Scientific Meeting; Atlanta, GA; 2012;18:368-9.

#### Forensic Anthropology, Postdoctoral Fellow, Medical Examiner