



A108 Rediscovering the Unknowns of South Jersey: The Long-Term Initiative to Develop a Standard Methodology for Unidentified Remains at the Southern Regional Medical Examiner Office (SRMEO)

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have an understanding of the challenges involved with identifying cold unidentified cases without a standard methodology and how Rediscovering the Unknowns of South Jersey (RUSJ) is making an effort to allay these challenges for the SRMEO.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing examples of the use of a formal qualitative algorithm on all unidentified cases. These examples will also highlight the importance of applying best forensic practices to cold cases.

RUSJ is a project that was undertaken by personnel at the SRMEO in 2010. The project's main goal was to better determine how forensic anthropology-related cases were handled by this office, historically and currently. RUSJ has evolved to include all unidentified cases within three county jurisdictions, the current oldest case being from 1972. RUSJ has encountered, and is likely to continue to encounter, a wide range of challenges. The challenges tend to focus primarily on gathering the missing information on the historical cases. Best forensic practices and technology have evolved immensely in the 40 years since many cold cases in the current database were investigated. Creating a comprehensive database of these cases revealed gaps in knowledge and documentation. These gaps ranged from DNA information to reports and photographs to the current locations of the actual remains. Research is still ongoing to ascertain any missing information. With the assistance of local law enforcement agencies, funeral homes, and various other state offices, this data is being gathered and verified when available.

This project is based on the premise that SRMEO is rediscovering cases that have not been actively investigated in more than 40 years and applying current forensic practice to them. RUSJ will work toward ensuring that best forensic practices, including, but not limited to, DNA testing and forensic anthropology consultation, are applied to historical data. The same testing and scrutiny will be applied to current and future unidentified cases. Creating a standardized method for handling unidentified remains and individuals can streamline the process. By adopting similar procedures, cooperating medical examiners offices could operate on a single reliable algorithm, making it possible to cross reference documentation for unidentified cases more efficiently. The implementation of best forensic practices in every office would be imperative to accommodating the standardized system. The hope is that a standard methodology can ensure consistency in all cases, unidentified and anthropological.

Since the creation of the database, the processes suggested in RUSJ have been applied to numerous cases. The results of this fact-finding mission have led to the positive of identification three individuals from 2001, 2010, and 2013. These previously unidentified individuals have since been reunited with family members, and the intention is for more identifications to follow.

The long-term goal is that implementation of this algorithm on current cases will mitigate the research time, costs, and manpower incurred by identifying historical cases. Utilizing a standardized procedure will ensure best



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forensic practices are used at the start of any case, thus improving the probability of identification in the future.

Outside the scientific community, the benefits of RUSJ are numerous and long term. The project provides the opportunity for more unidentified individuals to be identified and their remains returned to family members. It can also decrease the strain on county offices to process unclaimed individuals and give closure to loved ones long waiting for answers.

Unidentified, Identification, Cold Cases