



A128 A Mass Fatality Response and the Indigenous Community: The Intersection Between Science, Death, and Culture

*Kona Williams, MD**, Ontario Forensic Pathology Service, 25 Morton Shulman Avenue, Toronto, ON M3M 0B1, CANADA

After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the approach to death investigation in remote communities, the challenges faced by the death investigation team, and the indigenous people from socioeconomic, historical, and current viewpoints, as well as how to identify culturally appropriate and respectful outcomes when dealing with deaths in these communities.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by examining how this coordinated effort can be used as an example for other members of the forensic community to build better relationships with indigenous people by fostering mutual understanding and respect and facilitating the process of death investigation. The outcomes of these investigations can also identify root causes affecting deaths in these communities and point toward preventative solutions.

Nine people of the Pikangikum First Nation were recovered from a house fire in March of 2016. There was a swift multi-agency and multi-disciplinary approach to the scene, identification of the bodies, postmortem examination, and analysis of the findings. All nine individuals were positively identified using scientific methods and the cause of death for all family members was “smoke inhalation.” Despite the success of the death investigation team response, many challenges exist when deaths of this nature occur in indigenous communities.

Pikangikum is a remote reserve located in northwestern Ontario, Canada. It has a population of approximately 2,500 people of the Ojibwe First Nation. Historically, the interaction between the government, the health care system, and the police force with indigenous people in Canada has been fraught with racism, discrimination, and neglect. The death investigation system in Ontario encompasses all three institutions, leading to unique challenges when investigating deaths in indigenous communities. Combined with the remote location of many northern First Nation reserves, the lack of resources, such as running water, proper housing or adequate fire services, multiple socioeconomic factors as a result of intergeneration trauma, and the lasting effects of assimilation policies, tragedies such as these continue to occur; however, improved communication with families and community members, positive relationship-building, and mutual understanding between the death investigation team, the scientific community, and the indigenous population can serve to increase timely and culturally appropriate responses to these situations.

Multiple Fatality/DVI, Indigenous, Socioeconomic Impacts