A129 A Multiple Fatality Response to Nine Indigenous Deaths in a Burned House in Pikangikum, Ontario: The Scene and Its Challenges

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be informed concerning a house fire in a remote, indigenous community located in Pikangikum, Ontario, Canada, that resulted in nine fatalities and the subsequent forensic response at the scene. The response consisted of a multiagency provincial team who employed interdisciplinary methods to the background and witness investigations, including antemortem records collection, as well as to the search, recovery, and documentation of the scene, sets of human remains, and evidence of forensic interest. The agencies included representatives from the Office of the Chief Coroner (OCC), the Ontario Forensic Pathology Services (OFPS), the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), and the Office of the Fire Marshall (OFM). This presentation is being presented as an illustration of the work that the hosts of the International Association of Forensic Sciences 2017 triennial meeting, the OFPS, undertake in a multiple fatality event.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by explaining how a well-coordinated response with appropriate experts working systematically via a standard, interdisciplinary approach — implemented at the scene — serves to achieve a successful and expedient multiple fatality investigation of a significantly burned group of human remains.

The scene was located on the Pikangikum 14 Reserve in northwestern, Ontario, which was populated by ~2,500 members of the Ojibwe First Nation. Within the Canadian Shield, the Reserve was ~1,808 hectares in area, at an elevation of ~335m. In a rural neighborhood, the scene involved a private residence consisting of a one-story, six-room, wooden structure with side paneling. The fire was witnessed by neighbors at approximately 11:44 p.m. on March 29, 2016, and burned unsuppressed until at least 9:00 a.m. Multiple witness accounts, including police patrols, reported that the property owners were a married couple who were hosting a house party with extended family. The missing included six adults and three children who were each less than five years of age.

Forensic experts onsite included three OPP forensic identification officers, two OFM fire investigators, one OFM forensic engineer, and one OFPS forensic anthropologist. The ruins were such that there was significant thermal alteration to, and structural collapse of, approximately 95% of the structure. Systematic processing of the ruins took three working days, with the first 11 hours dedicated specifically to the exposure, documentation, and recovery of nine sets of human remains and associated artifacts. The cause of the fire could not be determined.

The main challenges included the remoteness of the location (more than 1,400km from Toronto) and the variable, cold weather (periods of snow with temperatures ranging from -15.5ºC to +3.8ºC and winds gusting up to 35km/h). These challenges affected general logistics, the initial response time by the forensic team, technical aspects of scene processing (e.g., the operability of an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) and 3D site scanner in addition to the amount of time an expert could physically work), as well as the transport of cases, records, and information to the laboratory in Toronto for examination.

Multiple Fatality/DVI, Forensic Anthropology, Scene Recovery