A85   The Current State of Forensic Anthropology as a Profession

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The goal of this presentation is to discuss the current state of forensic anthropology in terms of its qualification, certification, accreditation, and ethical processes, all of which are necessary when applying the criteria for a trade to be considered a profession.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by defining what makes someone a professional, discussing how professional guidelines are, or are not, applied in the field of forensic anthropology, and what the greater implications of this are for the discipline.

Forensic anthropology is a relatively young field, having been formally established in the 1970s. Over the past several decades, the field has continued to evolve in various ways. For example, the definition of forensic anthropology has been expanded to include forensic archaeology, taphonomy, and even socio-cultural approaches to medicolegal issues. Further, the development of methods has shifted toward standardization and validation to meet the *Daubert* challenge. While these changes have served to broaden and standardize the discipline, the education, training, and the practice of forensic anthropology has remained largely static.

Pellegrino argues the practice of a trade can be considered a profession if the trade requires: (1) a body of specialized knowledge; (2) practice within an ethical framework; (3) fulfillment of some societal need; and, (4) some form of social mandate allowing for latitude in a discipline's ability to set standards for education and performance of its practitioners.[1]

To address these requirements within the context of forensic anthropology, this presentation will discuss how forensic anthropologists: (1) possess a unique knowledge base of archaeological methods, skeletal biology, cultural context, and analytical skills; (2) practice within an ethical framework, as long as the forensic anthropologists are certified by the American Board of Forensic Anthropology (ABFA) or are members of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS); (3) provide a societal need via the medicolegal nature of the discipline; and, (4) possess a latitude for setting standards for both education and the performance of forensic anthropology, previously through the work of the Scientific Working Group for Forensic Anthropology (SWGAnth) and now of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) and the AAFS Standards Board (ASB).

While forensic anthropology meets the structural requirements to be considered a profession, the field is lacking in several criteria, as clear standards for ethical behavior, education, and the performance of forensic anthropology have not been expressly delineated or widely accepted. The current processes for ethical practice, certification, and accreditation as stipulations for requirements to act as a forensic anthropologist extend to very few individuals. The reality is that analysts without the current requisite education, training, professional memberships, or Quality Assurance (QA) practices are performing forensic anthropological casework. To address these issues, this presentation further discusses the need: (1) to approach education and training in terms of qualifications and certification; (2) for an enforceable ethical code; and, (3) to approach the practice of forensic anthropology through processes for QA and traceability via accreditation and following published standards and guidelines (e.g., those published by the SWGAnth or NIST OSAC Anthropology Subcommittee).

In the present state of forensic anthropology as a profession, there is little consensus or acceptance of professional practices. As such, the current guidelines are not being widely adhered to and are sometimes completely ignored. The implications of this are that analysts may be acting unethically, either by performing analyses beyond their professional expertise (as determined via certification), misrepresenting their qualifications (i.e., whether or not they are certified to perform the work), or doing harm to the case/investigation (by practicing without QA and traceability protocols). Lacking agreement on ethical practices, qualifications, and accreditations weakens the credibility of forensic anthropology as a profession, and invites non-professionals to practice forensic anthropology without oversight. It cannot be expected that law enforcement agencies, attorneys, or medical examiners be trained in examining the nuances of forensic anthropology as a profession; thus, it is up to forensic anthropologists to collectively generate and follow standards for the practice of their profession. If the discipline is to grow and stay relevant, considerations need to be given to the standardization of ethics, education, training, certification, and accreditation in ways that are inclusive and enforceable.

Reference(s):
1.   Pellegrino E.D. 2002. Professionalism, Profession and the Virtues of the Good Physician. *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine.* 69(6):378.

Professionalism, Ethics, Qualifications

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