



A99 A Virtual Anthropology Consultancy Service (VACS)

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand: (1) the value of a VACS; (2) how the service is run by forensic anthropologists; and (3) the ways in which police forces can benefit from the use of VACS.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating how VACS can be developed. This presentation discusses the manners in which this forensic casework is undertaken and how it impacts and benefits the forensic anthropologists running it, as well as the police forces who access it as a resource.

In 2008, in response to repeated queries from police officers across the United Kingdom regarding bones found during building works or by gardeners, the forensic anthropologists at the Centre for Anatomy and Human Identification set up the VACS. This was designed as a triage service for all bone finds that were reported to any of the 52 police forces across all four countries of the United Kingdom. The service allowed the officers to send images of the bone/bones that had been found to a dedicated email address. The images that were received were viewed by a member of the forensic anthropology team and the reporting officer was duly contacted with an analysis of the bone or bones in the image, given advice, and provided with a report. Cases that were sent to the service were answered within an hour of receipt, seven days a week, between 7:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m., and there was no charge to the forces for using the service. The forensic anthropologists who responded to these cases did so on a voluntary basis.

Use of the service rose rapidly, from a low of 84 cases in the first full year, increasing year by year to a high of 506 cases in 2016. The total number of cases responded to between 2008 and 2017 was 3,116. Forty-five percent of all cases were sent in the evenings and on weekends and, while percentages varied year to year, an average of 20% were human. Many of the cases were of bones found during normal activities, such as gardening, but bones were found in a huge number of situations, including during building works and renovations and by ramblers. A small number of images have been of non-osseous items, usually consisting of models of body parts, with a peak in these cases seen around the end of October, coinciding with Halloween.

Police forces incorporated the service in their Crime Scene Investigator (CSI) training and as part of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for actions to take if a bone was reported. The service provided a timely answer, allowing senior officers to have a real-time response, which had an impact on their ability to decide how to deploy their officers, impacting favorably on their budget. This ability to have a quick response also meant that the service was incorporated as part of official search strategies during missing persons searches; these latter cases often resulted in images of hundreds of bones but meant that officers were not constrained waiting for specialists to arrive to confirm the origin of a bone. Each case was responded to on an individual basis and involved the production of a brief forensic report. This meant that while the forensic anthropologists running the service were not paid for the time they donated, they were able to use it as an ideal method of training students and less experienced forensic anthropologists who learn how to liaise and communicate with police, coroners, or procurators fiscal and receive instructions on how to write a forensic report. The volume of cases also provides a large repository of casework that currently acts as a teaching resource for both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Consultancy, Forensic Anthropology, Casework