



G30 When Arson Becomes Murder: Antemortem Records Fire the Identification Process

Randolph L. Mitchell, DMD, Lyons, NY 14489*

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have learned to await the development of all possible leads for antemortem dental records after a death that has rendered the victim unidentifiable by conventional means. Attendees will learn to have patience as the investigation of the death continues and to avoid the temptation of trying to make a positive identification without adequate records to support the identification.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by opening the minds of the investigative team when searching for antemortem information by increasing their awareness of some unusual local sources of this information at the scene. This information can narrow their records search to a much more focused area, speeding the acquisition of the antemortem information and making the positive identification possible.

Often, when the decedent is found in a location where there was no known person living and with no personal effects available, the investigators seem to be at a dead end right from the beginning and must be creative in their investigative techniques to find a logical starting point to determine a “believed to be.” Acquiring the necessary Antemortem (AM) records needed to make a solid dental identification is also very challenging in these cases.

This is perfectly illustrated in an actual case study of an arson case in which the decedent was found with no real identifiers for the investigators to use. The body was literally unrecognizable, burned to the point where there was no intact skin on the body for fingerprinting to be used or even an idea of who to match DNA with. The postmortem dental examination and charting was fairly routine. Even though several of the dental structures were damaged by the fire to the extent that they would be useless for identification purposes, there were several teeth intact that had dental restorations that could be used as excellent exemplars in a dental identification, given some records with which to compare them. There was absolutely no logical place to start the search for AM dental records.

The investigators caught a real break after several days that began to clear the picture of a possible lead on who the victim of this arson was. Some of the local inhabitants of the area knew that someone had been living in the structure that was burned, but since they were homeless and only knew each other by “street names,” more research would be necessary. Eventually, through some information garnered by the investigators from a governmental agency, a possible name for the John Doe was offered. Since the decedent was believed to be homeless, the search for dental records spread outward from the center of a circle defined by the fire scene. Clinics that provide health service to patients who are on social service benefits were checked to see if they had provided services to someone of that name. Dental records were located for a person of that name at one of the local clinics; those records were compared to that of John Doe and yielded a positive identification of the decedent. Once again, the importance of the AM records in making a dental identification is driven home by this case.

Sources, Records, Identification