



A155 Migrants, Crime, and Unidentified Bodies: The Wits Human Identification Unit (HIU) Experience

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have gained insight into forensic anthropology in South Africa and some of the problems associated with personal identification of the decedents.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the advantages of collaborations when attempting to identify the skeletal remains of unknown decedents and will also showcase possible opportunities to gain hands-on experience in forensic anthropology in South Africa.

South Africa is a developing country and home to many documented and undocumented migrants from all over Africa. Unfortunately, crime and violence are rampant. Recent statistics reported that approximately 11% of all deaths in South Africa are due to non-natural causes. The major causes of these non-natural deaths include assault and transport-related accidents. Although murder is not one of the major causes of non-natural deaths, approximately 52 people are murdered in the country every day. This results in a large number of postmortem examinations and forensic anthropological cases. Regrettably, many of these decedents enter the Forensic Pathology Services (FPS) as unknown individuals, and about one in ten in the Gauteng Province will remain unidentified.

To assist with the skeletal analyses of unknown deceased individuals, the HIU, which forms part of the Human Identification and Variation Research Unit (HIVRU) in the School of Anatomical Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand was established in 2016. This unit works in close collaboration with the FPS located in Johannesburg and assists with forensic anthropological analyses of all cases from the southern cluster mortuaries in the Gauteng Province, which is the most populous region in the country. The mandate of the HIU is to establish a biological profile that can be used by the South African Police Service (SAPS) in conjunction with information provided by the FPS and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to make a positive identification. Trauma analyses are also frequently requested, even when the identification is known. By April 2019, approximately 120 cases have been received by the HIU, of which 89 have been completed.

Attesting to the problems in the system, forensic anthropological case analyses during the past two years have included the analyses of numerous cases dating back nearly ten years. The majority of remains examined represented Black adult males. Nearly all cases had dentition present; however, this is often of little use as most South Africans and migrants cannot afford dental care or have perfect teeth and, as such, have no dental records. Many cases exhibit signs of trauma, often with a combination of both antemortem and peri-mortem trauma, suggesting a high-risk lifestyle of many of the victims. Multiple cases of ballistic trauma, including cases of multiple gunshots, are also encountered. These cases are often found at mine sites and are frequently related to “Zama Zamas,” who are mainly illegal migrant gold miners.

Identification of the dead is a basic human right and, despite the difficulties, forensic anthropologists are making every attempt to contribute. Agreements for closer collaboration between FPS, HIU, and the Victim Identification Centre (VIC) of the SAPS have been put in place to aid in the personal identification of unknown and undocumented individuals. Through this collaboration, forensic anthropological case analyses are not only completed for cases from the southern parts of Gauteng, but also from other provinces, such as the Free State, Eastern Cape, and Northern Cape, that do not have their own forensic anthropological services.

Although the identification process has many difficulties, a few success stories keep forensic anthropologists motivated. To date, six cases have been positively identified. Four of these identifications were made through DNA confirmation and two through the use of secondary identifiers, including clothing and tattoos. There are also three more cases that could hopefully be identified. One case is awaiting DNA analysis and two others are waiting for facial approximation. Painstakingly slowly, the unknown and undocumented are being identified.

South Africa, Forensic Anthropology, Personal Identification