

A79 What Happens to Unidentified or Unclaimed Human Remains Within the Contexts of Five Asian Medicolegal Systems?

Sherry C. Fox, PhD, International Committee of the Red Cross, Bangkok 10110, THAILAND; Laurel Clegg, MSc, International Committee of the Red Cross, Islamabad, PAKISTAN; Lay See Khoo, PhD, National Institute of Forensic Medicine, Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan 50586, MALAYSIA; Rijen Shrestha, MD, Maharajgunj Medical Campus, Kathmandu, NEPAL; Alex Starkie, Frome, Somerset BA11 4DD, UNITED KINGDOM; Panjai Wohanndee, MD, PhD, Ministry of Justice, Bangkok, THAILAND*

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better appreciate the diversity in the medicolegal systems in Asia, the challenges mass disasters can present in identification, and the manner in which Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand each manage unidentified human remains.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting how there is not one universal medicolegal system in Asia that will work within every country and how each medicolegal system manages the disposition of unidentified human remains differently.

Asia is a dynamic region that boasts countries with the two largest populations in the world. As such, the medicolegal systems in the region must cope with large numbers of deaths and potential large numbers of death investigations. Due to different histories, and reflecting the cultural diversity in the region with respect to languages, religions, ways of life, and burial customs, different medicolegal systems have been established that respond to the various needs within their geopolitical structures.

This study aims to demonstrate the diversity in the medicolegal systems of Asia by comparing what autopsy means, when autopsy is performed, the mandate for death investigation, and what happens to unidentified human remains, among others, in the contexts of the following five countries: Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand. In addition to the variables outlined above of language, religion, ways of life, and burial customs, among others, these countries vary in size, population, major religion, and geography—one is landlocked and another is an island nation, for example.

One constraint that appears to be common among all of the countries under study, however, is the lack of storage facilities for long-term, unidentified, or unclaimed bodies. How each country manages their unidentified or unclaimed human remains varies, in part depending upon the dominant religious beliefs of each country. Burial customs in these contexts in Asia range from inhumation burial common among Muslims and Christians to cremation burial common among Hindus and Buddhists. The disposition of unidentified and/or unclaimed human remains in these contexts include marked common graves and mass burials. The timing of when these burials take place also varies within each context. There are a multitude of reasons for why a body is not identified or left unclaimed. One related factor in Asia is that the region is prone to natural disasters in the form of cyclones, tsunamis, floods, and earthquakes. These natural disasters present a risk to the lives of the inhabitants, and further, the risk of not being identified, especially in the case of mass casualties. As an example, there are yet unidentified human remains from the mass disaster that resulted from the 2004 earthquake/tsunami in Indonesia.

What is clear, as the results of this study demonstrate, is that while there is no universal medicolegal system that would work within every country, the various medicolegal systems in Asia presented in this study meet the basic requirements within their own regulations and contexts. Finally, how each country solves the issue of unidentified and/or unclaimed bodies varies vastly, as will be presented.

Medicolegal Systems, Asia, Unidentified Human Remains