



A80 Antemortem Data Collection in West Africa as Part of the Effort to Identify Deceased Migrants: A Humanitarian Dilemma

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the technical and ethical challenges involved in the collection of antemortem data for deaths related to migration for humanitarian purposes.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing the different elements that need to be considered concerning antemortem data collection for migrants from West Africa.

According to the most recent figures from the International Organization for Migration, since 2014 at least 14,000 migrants lost their lives while crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

In January 2017, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Italian Red Cross signed a Tripartite Agreement with the Office of the Special Commissioner of the Italian Government for Missing Persons to support in the efforts of identification of dead migrants recovered in Italy, with an exclusive humanitarian purpose.

Within this framework, an ICRC project was launched to assist with identification of the victims of one of the largest incidents in the Mediterranean Sea. On April 18, 2015, an estimated 1,000 migrants lost their lives. As part of the project, families of missing migrants potentially affected by this shipwreck are sought in their countries of residence and/or countries of origin, and, if located, are interviewed to aid identification efforts. In Western African countries, where many of the victims are believed to be from, the search for the families remains extremely difficult due to the limited information available.

Moreover, the specific challenges in the collection of the antemortem data from the relatives who reside not only in Africa, but across the globe, has highlighted the need to reframe what is considered useful information for identification. Generally, antemortem data is collected with the underlying assumption that individuals possess specific attributes that will allow them to stand out from a group of individuals. The logic is that physical traits, medical treatment, and lifestyle imprint specific elements to individuals that may, together with other elements, assist in the identification process. This assumes, unfortunately, that most people have access to services that leave a record (e.g., dental records, hospital records, X-rays, etc.). Depending on an individual's and his or her community's circumstances, such services are not always accessible.

Besides the lack of medical and physical information available, differences in culture, language, religion, and family structure references between the interviewer and the interviewee challenge the medicolegal approach to collection and reporting. Not always acknowledged is the collector scientist's expectation that the available data will respond to his/her needs, while the data provided does not easily have an equivalent. For example, a "window" observed between front teeth (emic) as described by a relative, could be described as a diastema or a missing tooth in the dental or postmortem examination (etic). The comparative data that is required for scientific identification may exist, but not in a format familiar to the scientist.

At the same time, genetic identification in the migration transnational context has its own challenges in terms of how data is shared and stored as well as how collection is planned. For example, in the collection of genealogical data to support collection of Biological Reference Samples (BRS) from surviving family members, several assumed categories such as cousin, brother, or sister may not correspond to biological relationships needed for genetic testing. In addition, common to West African culture, any child adopted into the family automatically becomes a son or a daughter and will be referred to as such. Even descriptions of personal effects (specifically clothing) may be unreliable as these are easily changed after departure up to embarkation.

Experience has shown the need for an innovative, pragmatic humanitarian approach to antemortem data collection in the migration context. Usually antemortem data includes information on missing persons, notably personal, physical, medical, and dental information, as well as information on circumstances related to the disappearance. A reflection is needed, though, on methods to better exploit circumstantial and contextual information (e.g., the trip itself, fellow travelers) coupled with the usually scarce individual biological data.

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