BS1   Ethno-Cultural and Religious Considerations in the Management of the Dead

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have a greater knowledge of the ethics, customs, norms, and taboos surrounding death and the dead for many minority cultures and religions within their professional and personal communities. This presentation will describe several cultures and religions that forensic professionals may encounter in their jurisdictions, both in the United States and worldwide, along with each respective approach to the management of their dead, based upon this better understanding.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by serving to assist the forensic professional in overcoming some of the obstacles that are present when identifying, investigating, and examining a decedent that is a member of these ethno-cultural communities.

Culture and religion profoundly influence many aspects of modern life. These factors also carry forward after death and may affect our management of the deceased. It is recognized that increasing human migration across global geographical borders results in decedents sometimes being managed within a culture and community that is foreign to them. Loved ones, family, and members of the integrated community of the deceased also bring expectations, norms, and taboos to a forensic setting and these influences may at times increase the complexity of and even hinder the process of examination, identification, and release of the dead. Although it is impossible to be intimately familiar with all religions and cultures, we as forensic professionals should be educated and sensitive to the roles each may play in our respective areas of expertise while avoiding the risk of stereotyping the deceased.

It is important to the process and to the outcome that the forensic professional understands not only the ethno-cultural and religious considerations associated with the deceased, and other members of the affected community, but also their own, and how these may relate to the context and perhaps to any biases that may be subsequently introduced. So, the complexity of the juxtaposition of different cultures and expectations may be multiplied in a situation where the forensic practitioner is anything other than the ideal of absolute neutrality.

The interplay of the deceased's culture and the forensic professional's legal and ethical responsibilities can pose significant challenges when experienced against a backdrop of factors including gender and acculturation, notably in cases in which there are multiple and/or commingled fatalities being examined at one time in one spatial setting. Varied cultural and religious mores for managing the dead also dictate appropriate disclosures, privacy, and communication with the relatives of the deceased. Some difficulties can, at least, be partially overcome with an understanding of these sensitivities.

This presentation hopes to highlight many of the unique aspects of the belief systems and social constructs that may be encountered during the career of a forensic professional in the context of the management of the dead and provide tools and a framework for increased sensitivity and understanding. This, in turn, will provide an opportunity to allow the dignity and basic human rights of the deceased to perhaps be respected more fully.

Examples will be drawn from many cultural and religious backgrounds, including Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Native American, Maori, and Pasifika peoples.

Religion, Culture, Management of the Dead