

Examination of Human Remains by Forensic Pathologists in the Disaster Victim Identification Context



WHAT IS AN AAFS STANDARD FACTSHEET?

The AAFS produces clear, concise, and easy-to-understand factsheets to summarize the contents of technical and professional forensic science standards on the OSAC Registry. They are not intended to provide an interpretation for any portion of a published standard.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STANDARD?

This standard provides best practices for forensic pathologists who examine human remains in the context of mass fatality incidents, specifically in disaster victim identification (DVI) operations.

It aims to improve the accuracy and consistency of postmortem data collection by providing guidelines for forensic pathologists to follow during DVI operations.

Various aspects of the examination process, including pre-examination activities, postmortem radiographs, personal effects, external and internal examination of the remains, and injury documentation, are covered.

WHY IS THIS STANDARD IMPORTANT? WHAT ARE ITS BENEFITS?

This standard emphasizes the importance of collecting postmortem data that can aid in identifying human remains. By collecting this information in a standardized way, the likelihood of identifying human remains can be increased.

The standard promotes coordination and communication among the team involved in DVI operations to fill gaps and reduce overlap in the examination process. By providing a framework for forensic pathologists to effectively and efficiently conduct their duties, the standard has the potential to reduce the time and resources required for identification.



HOW IS THIS STANDARD USED, AND WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS?

Forensic pathologists are responsible for collecting data derived from the physical examination of human remains recovered from mass fatality incidents for the purpose of 1) scientific identification and 2) determination of cause and manner of death.

The standard includes a chronological description of the activities of the pathologist in the mass fatality investigation context, emphasizing the importance of a thorough examination of remains as soon as possible before ongoing decomposition limits the value of the examination.

The forensic pathologist or their representative should create a clothing and personal items/effects inventory of all items on the remains with a label bearing a unique case number, describe the position of the personal effects on the body, provide information regarding the level of association with the body, and document the contents of all clothing pockets, among other things. The standard covers the determination to conduct an autopsy, internal examination of the remains, fragmentation and commingling, injury documentation, and toxicology.

The standard encourages conformance through the development, implementation, exercise, and review of mass fatality incident response operating procedures.