F53 Albuquerque, New Mexico Serial Homicides – The Dental Identification of Seven Skeletal Remains Recovered From a Clandestine Burial Site

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have an understanding of the difficulties in making dental identifications with limited or no antemortem dental records and to learn how the identifications of remains from this large serial homicide burial site were made.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the importance of obtaining antemortem dental radiographs and written records soon after a person goes missing. Since all of these remains had evidence of past dental treatment, it is likely that all eleven remains could have been identified quickly if antemortem records had been obtained when the women went missing.

On February 2, 2009 a left human femur was found by a woman walking her dog in a remote area of Albuquerque, NM. Over the ensuing three months, eleven complete and partial sets of human skeletal remains were recovered from this recently developed land for a home subdivision. It was soon apparent that these were modern remains, perhaps some of twenty four women that had gone missing in Albuquerque between 2001 and 2005.

Antemortem medical and dental records on these twenty four missing women were scant. Other than missing person reports being filed when these women went missing, little was done in follow-up to obtain antemortem medical and dental records. Once the recovery began and it was realized that these might be some of the missing women, a concerted effort was made to obtain antemortem medical and dental records by the New Mexico Office of the Medical Investigator (NMOMI). NMOMI investigators searched for hospital records, dental records, and correctional and institutional facility records. New Mexico dentists were contacted and asked to search their current and archived records for records of these women.

As a result of this effort, seven of these recently recovered remains have been positively identified by dental comparisons with antemortem dental and medical radiographs and written records. Another skeleton recovered in 2004 that had remained unidentified until June 2009 was also identified by dental comparison as one of the twenty-four missing women from Albuquerque.

This presentation will focus on the recovery and identification of these emains. The dental identifications were not only based on the comparison of antemortem dental radiographs and written dental records with the postmortem evidence, but also on the comparisons of head and neck CT scans, facial photographs, medical records, and in one case an oral surgeon recognizing his surgical handiwork of an osteotomy and the internal wire fixation he placed on the fractured ramus of a mandible.

The presentation will also stress the importance of the need to obtain antemortem records of missing persons in a timely manner. All but one of the eleven remains exhibited evidence of past dental treatment. Some had extracted teeth, silver amalgam restorations, sealants, endodontically treated teeth, and crowns. They had been to a dentist, therefore a dental record and likely dental radiographs were probably available at the time these women went missing, yet missing person investigators did not obtain the information at that time. Trying to find records three to nine years after a person has gone missing is difficult. Records are purged, archived at remote locations, dental practices are sold, dentists die, and offices are reluctant to spend the time needed to search for old records. It is incumbent upon law enforcement to seek out missing persons dental records after thirty days. A missing person report with the supplemental dental coding must be entered into the NCIC missing person database as well as the NamUs MP database. Along with the dental coding, it is important that images of the radiographs be uploaded into the NamUs file and the National Dental Image Repository (NDIR) so they can be accessed by forensic odontologists attempting to make comparative dental identifications.

Dental Identification, Missing Persons, Skeletal Remains

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