

Identification of Cadavers using Forensic Pathology

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Received: 03-Nov-2022, Manuscript No. JFP-22-21006; **Editor assigned:** 04-Nov-2022, PreQC No. JFP-22-21006 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 19-Nov-2022, QC No. JFP-22-21006 (Q); **Revised:** 22-Nov-2022, Manuscript No. JFP-22-21006 (R); **Published:** 28-Nov-2022, doi: 10.35248/2684-1312.22.7(6).143

Abstract

A critical issue in forensic pathology is the identification of cadavers, which is the primary responsibility of forensic anthropologists and dentists. However, outside of a few American papers, the official nature of this issue is still poorly understood in most other nations. The authors of this article describe a descriptive analysis of unidentified decedents in Milan over a 14-year period (1995-2008). With a mean of 32 unidentified cases each year, the number of cadavers or human remains arriving at the morgue without an identity totals 3.1% of all autopsies at the Institute of Legal Medicine; 62% of these people were positively recognized within a time frame of a few days to 10 years. On average, 17% are still unidentified. The majority of identification procedures utilized forensic anthropology and dentistry. In order to help forensic pathologists, anthropologists, and odontologists focus on this problem and potential remedies in their respective nations, this study intends to shed light on the subject.

Keywords: Forensic anthropology • Forensic odontology • Forensic pathology • Unidentified decedents

Introduction

For ethical, legal, and civil grounds, the identification of corpses is a crucial topic in forensic pathology. All people have the right to be buried and mourned; many civil processes, such as those involving inheritance disputes and insurance payments, cannot be completed without the identification of a cadaver; and, most importantly, without the victim's identity, a crime is practically impossible to solve. As a result, unidentified bodies and remains that need to be identified are commonly encountered by forensic pathologists, but especially by forensic anthropologists and odontologists. The fact that there are unidentified decedents is an underappreciated issue, as seen by the dearth of papers on the subject and, in particular, websites that promote it, like the Doe Network. Although this may come as a surprise, the official nature of the issue is still little understood in the majority of nations and is only going to get worse as a result of the weakening of family bonds in contemporary culture and the rise of both legal and illegal immigration in some of those nations. Worldwide, very little is known, which could be for a number of reasons depending on the country. The absence of a uniform method for registering unidentified deaths is a problem that affects everyone, and it is typically coupled by the absence of adequately organized databases that should be able to compare such deaths to counterparts of missing persons. Some authors have attempted to address the issue in-depth and in detail in the United States. In 2006, Hanzlick and colleagues first raised the issue. They talked about epidemiology data from the Fulton County, Georgia, area between 2003 and 2004, where in 2001 a website for

the office was launched with details on unidentified decedents. They looked at the demographics, techniques, turnaround times, and the percentage of cases where identification was successful but cases remained unidentified for protracted periods of time. In the year, there were 4.4% of unidentified decedents who were reported. Of these, 83% had a positive identification within two days, and only 0.3% had no identification at all. Then, in 2008, Hanzlick and Clark unveiled a concept National Website Registry for the Unidentified. More recently, Paulozzi et al. attempted to estimate the number of annual uncertified deaths in the US from 1979 to 2004 based on death certificates. They discovered that there were, on average, 413 unexplained fatalities per year, totaling 10,287 deaths for the study's time period. If one compares these data to those of the National Institute of Justice which reported 13,486 since record keeping began, and those of NCIC (National Crime Information Centre), which reports about 3600 unidentified decedents from 1985 to 2004, there are discrepancies, as the authors themselves acknowledge. These writers claim that 3 things are to blame for this mischaracterization of the issue: no requirements for names to be entered in fields for unidentified bodies.

Furthermore, voluntary reports can be made to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Crime Information Centre, but databases derived from such passive reporting systems may miss many cases. Finally, only a small number of local jurisdictions may accumulate enough unidentified decedent data for suitable studies because not all jurisdictions use the term John or Jane Doe. Even less is understood about Europe. The issue has so far only been addressed in one paper in the international forensic literature. By distributing questionnaires to central government agencies in Europe, the authors of this brief study aimed to confirm the scope of the problem on a continental.

For the years 1994 to 1998, the police departments (Interpol Offices) of every EU member state requested information on the number of unidentified bodies that were remained unaccounted for each year. Only 8 nations were able to provide a complete response (Denmark, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Luxembourg, Spain, and Germany), and many of them acknowledged that there was no official data available. A total of 3035 instances from the 8 nations that responded were counted, of which 800 (30% approx.) were still unidentified. While the other nations either remained silent or acknowledged that they lacked information on the occurrence, Austria only provided fragmentary information. When considered in 1991 the 98 unidentified deceased persons per year in Frankfurt during a period of five years. However, the focus of this study was on the mechanisms of identification rather than the overall issue. One of the rare studies of its kind for Europe is the descriptive study of unidentified decedents that we offer in this article. It covers a comprehensive 14-year (1995-2008) study from Milano, Italy's second-largest city, which conducts the most autopsy annually nationwide (1000 circa). Milano has so far retained the only University Institute of Legal Medicine that has served as a problem observatory for 14 years and has shared local updates on the issue as well as biological profiles of all unexplained decedents on the university website, which is open to everyone, with the investigating authorities. Since there is still no national database of unidentified decedents in Italy to link with missing persons, this was done to temporarily find a solution at least for unidentified decedents in Milan. The writers actually began asking governmental entities for a solution as soon as it became clear how big the issue was that people who vanished in places like Rome, Naples, or even, paradoxically, towns close to Milano, for example, would have gone years without being identified and would have been buried without a name if it weren't for the advertising on the website and partnership with national television programs that deal with missing people, like "Chi l'Ha Visto?" (Raitre). More unexpectedly, many of these individuals had previously been reported missing on a regular basis. However, the lack of a national database of unidentified decedents to cross-reference with missing persons has resulted in this ludicrous situation. However, like many other European nations, Italy is a country

where the issue is unknown and little discussed. The Institute of Legal Medicine of Milan attempted to conduct a survey across all hospitals and medico-legal Institutes nationwide in 1999, requesting the number of unidentified decedents. This issue was disregarded by politicians for a number of years.

Again, few institutes answered because there is no requirement to maintain track of these decedents. The identification of unidentified decedents is actually subject to very few laws and regulations in our nation; in Italy, however, the code of criminal procedure states that "if the suspicion of a crime arises from the death of an individual, the prosecutor verifies the cause of death... after the necessary inquiries for identification." According to the same article, the unidentified dead must be photographed, exposed, and had his or her clothing and possessions catalogued. However, this kind of information typically leads to the Procurator's office, which is a dead end. Only the Procurator handling the matter is told, and typically, the information is left at that. The problem gets worse if the deceased person is not the focus of a legal investigation. For instance, if a body is discovered but is not the victim of a crime, the magistrate is not in charge of or concerned with that particular body's identification. The "Regolamento di Polizia Mortuaria" (a civil regional code that specifies, among other things, procedures for cadavers and human remains) applies in certain situations. Merely requests that "unidentified corpses be exposed for recognition" (remains). This is the sole detailed instruction about the handling of unidentified bodies that are not subject to judicial authority. It is also challenging to monitor the geographical locations of unidentified bodies. Unknown deceased persons be distributed with information and transported to local hospitals, cemeteries, and forensic pathology labs. One cannot know how many or where these structures are because there is no tracking system that is shared by all of them. Additionally, the spread of unidentified decedents throughout seve-

-ral centers and the loss of information are both facilitated by the tendency toward decentralizing health services, including postmortem exams. This study aims to expose and describe the phenomenon of unidentified decedents (which closely concerns anthropologists and odontologists) in the largest autopsy population in Italy, that of Milano, over a 14-year period (1995-2008) (14,607 autopsies), in order to verify the size of the phenomenon in comparison with the scant literature (mainly American) and highlight the features of this issue.

Discussion

The study's findings have given us important information on the population of unidentified decedents. These statistics are comparable with the sparse literature and in particular with Hanzlick and Smith's, who indicate 4.4% of unknown decedents between 2003 and 2004 in Fulton County, Georgia. 3% of all cases who underwent autopsy at the Institute of Legal Medicine in Milan were unidentified. According to Paulozzi et al., there are 28.5% more unidentified decedents per 10 million people each year than there were in the previous year. These differences in US statistics could be the result of the factors mentioned in the introduction as well as the patchy system for recording unidentified decedents. The percentage of decedents who are still unidentified, or "cold cases," is where the greatest discrepancies between our study's findings and those in the literature are found. In Fulton County, this number is only 6%, compared to 17% in Milano. This discrepancy could be explained by the fact that, in contrast to Fulton County, Italy lacks a database that is useful for comparing unexplained bodies and missing persons. Males have a high frequency, same like in the US. The majority of John and Jane Does in Milano are between the ages of 21 and 40 (60%),but an increase in subjects older than 60 is starting to be noticed.