

MORALITY VERSUS PROFIT.

The traditional methods used by forensic odontologists for identifying victims of mass disasters are being challenged by large multinational disaster management companies. Even where dental material is available, dental identification is being replaced by DNA analysis, a more expensive and time consuming laboratory technique. These companies who manage the disasters on behalf of the airlines/governments are sidelining the traditional methods of victim identification. As disaster managers, they take charge of DNA collection from families who have lost loved ones but at the same time collect ante-mortem records, which they then keep safely in their possession. Not even police officers can coerce them into parting with these records. This raises moral issues which need to be addressed. Should dental identification, an accurate, cheap and fast method be replaced by an expensive and time consuming technique which economically swells the coffers of the large multinationals? The DNA analysis can take several months to complete, keeping families waiting long periods for confirmation of positive identification and the return of the mortal remains. Their justification is that no other method except DNA can identify the many different body parts that might be found at a disaster scene. The issues that have to be addressed are the following:

- Should whole bodies with good dental characteristics and ante-mortem records also wait for DNA identification?
- Should mutilated bodies with good dental characteristics and ante-mortem records not be identified by dental means and then kept until body parts are added when DNA analysis of the remaining parts is made known?
- The profession at large must determine how important it is for families to know if their next of kin have been positively identified (fast by dental means), versus getting every body part back after completion of DNA analysis months after the disaster.

The relevant authorities need to be aware of the identification capabilities of well trained forensic odontologists. We as a profession need to be adequately prepared to assist in the identification process in all eventualities, performing our duties in an efficient and professional way. DNA is unquestionably the method of choice when no dental or fingerprint material is available. If dental material or fingerprints are present, these methods should be encouraged on moral and ethical lines. The time has come for us to unite against those who wait like vultures to swoop down and make a quick buck out of the misfortunes of others. If we are not proactive in procuring a definitive role in mass disaster management we might find ourselves redundant in the future.

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