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## MISSING AND UNIDENTIFIED PERSONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND FORENSIC ODONTOLOGY

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*The author declares to have no conflict of interest.*

*The non-profit making Association 'Penelope' created in 2002 with the purpose of pursuing social solidarity, people and dignity, focuses attention on the issue of missing people. With expert help it supports families by organizing conferences and publishing information, aiming to raise public awareness so that missing people are not forgotten. Among the aims of the organization is that of the promotion of suitable instrumentation for the collection and elaboration of data regarding missing people and act as a connection between other organizations, national and local governmental authorities.*

*In 2011 the 'Penelope' Association created a pro bono legal assistance service, made up of lawyers and forensic experts, supporting families looking for their missing family members. A cooperation with the association 'Psicologi per i Popoli' ('Psychologists for the People') was also set up in order to offer psychological assistance to families. The Italian data is disconcerting: approximately 25 thousand people have disappeared since 1974, with an annual growth of 800-1000 people. Out of these, 1651 are Italian children and as many as 8153 are foreign children. To date, 832 bodies have been found and still await identification. In 2006 the regional branch of 'Penelope' was founded in Apulia, south Italy. A total of 1702 people have been reported missing since 1974 and a total of 53 cadavers currently await identification.*

*In order to describe common psychological conditions, some cases of missing people in Apulia have been included: for family members of missing people, time becomes suspended and indefinite. There is a gradual confusion regarding the perception of time as well as disruption of the sleep-wake rhythm. Everyday activities - routines and work engagements - are all suspended, as the return of the missing person becomes top priority. The absence of a person due to uncertain causes leads to an endless wait, which destabilizes the cognitive system and affects the ability to remember, to reason, to calculate times and distances and to understand time and space. This creates an uncertain social representation of the self, and can even lead to one losing the perception of reality.*

*In order to maximize the efficacy of the autopsy as well as the identification process of human remains, it is necessary to perform a post-mortem examination following Interpol recommendations. The incomplete collection of such data could represent a violation of human rights, because once the fate of a missing person has been determined to be death, all available means must be undertaken to ensure recovery of the body and any personal effects.*



*Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the role of the forensic odontologist and on their collaboration during the autopsy of unidentified cadavers, regardless of the circumstances. Of the 832 bodies it appears that only 61 bodies received an odontological assessment with a proper odontogram charting. The failure to routinely employ odontologists in missing persons investigations may result in a reduction of additional findings which, together with other circumstantial evidence, could lead to a delay in positive identification and actually prolong the condition of suspended grief, a situation which needs a body, even if such a body is lifeless, in order to bring a ritualistic 'end' to the relationship.*

**KEYWORDS:** Forensic Odontology, Missing and Unidentified people, Human Rights.

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