

SPOKANE COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE

Statement of Policy, Procedure and Practice

Policy Title: IDENTIFICATION

Policy:

Identify the dead with a high degree of certainty.

Make a written record of the method(s) used to establish or confirm the identity of each decedent.

For Medical Examiner Office purposes, no matter what method(s) is used, the identity of the decedent is to be confirmed to the satisfaction of the Medical Examiner that is certifying the death.

Authorization from a Medical Examiner is required prior to the release of an unidentified body from the Medical Examiner's facility.

Cases involving unidentified individuals are to be specifically tracked and reviewed quarterly.

Procedures and Practices:

All methods for establishing or confirming the individual identity of a decedent should be considered.

Caution is to be exercised when considering the identity of an individual based on driver's licenses, 'ID" cards, and miscellaneous cards or papers found with the body. "False" or borrowed items are not uncommon.

The method used to establish or confirm the identity of the decedent is to be recorded by the Medical Investigator in the investigative report. The autopsy pathologist will describe the method of identification on the autopsy worksheet.

Until the identity of the decedent is established as to name, the case number is to be used on all paperwork and reference material along with UDF (unidentified female), UDM (unidentified male), or UDR (unidentified remains) along with date of body discovery and place of death. *Do not use Jane/John Doe references.*

- *EXAMPLE:* "UDM 08-0950, 030408, 1001 E. Sprague"

In the database "Last Name" and date of death/body discovery is 1st name as in UDF 030408.

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IDENTIFICATION AT SCENE OF INVESTIGATION:

Investigating Officer

- If identification of the decedent is accomplished at the scene by the investigating officer, the way by which identification was made must be recorded in the investigative report.

Family Member

- If a family member or acquaintance made identification, the name, relationship, and phone number of that person is recorded in the Medical Examiner investigative report.

Officer at Scene

- If the officer at the scene identified the body using a driver's license or other identifying photograph, that license or article should accompany the body (sealed in the body bag) to the Medical Examiner's Office.
- At the Medical Examiner's Facility, the license will be invalidated by a hole punch, then saved permanently in the case file. If, however, next-of-kin requests return of the identifying item, it will be returned using appropriate personal property procedures and next-of-kin signature and/or authorization. A photocopy of the item will first be made for the permanent file.

Beware of visual identification of decomposed or burned remains. If you disagree or have doubts about how identification was performed at the scene, educate the investigating officer as to what other means of identification might be appropriate. We will evaluate the appropriateness of all such identifications and in jurisdiction-assumed cases have final authority over identification.

IDENTIFICATION AT MEDICAL EXAMINER'S FACILITY:

If unidentified at the scene, remains should be transported to the Medical Examiner's Morgue labeled as "unidentified" ("UDR" if sex is Indeterminate), "UDF" or "UDM" with date and place where the body was discovered:

- *EXAMPLE:* "UDF 030408, 1001 E. Sprague"

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If two such unidentified bodies are found at a scene, care should be taken to differentiate their locations for transportation. They should be labeled "A" and "B" (UDF072803A) in addition to the usual descriptive terms. After arrival at the Medical Examiner's Office unidentified remains are also labeled with a band bearing a ME case number, as soon as the case number is available.

Traditional and case-specific methods are utilized at the ME Facility for the identification of remains:

- A. Fingerprint comparison.
 - When possible, the right or left thumbs and index fingers are fingerprinted for every decedent brought to the facility. Comparisons are made when remains are unidentified. Spokane County Forensic Unit performs the comparisons. A weekly list of decedents is also submitted to IDENT so records can be purged.
- B. A Forensic Odontologist, Dr. Frank Morgan, performs dental comparisons.
 - The Medical Examiner's Staff assists Dr. Morgan in obtaining dental records for comparison, removing the jaw when necessary, etc. The Medical Examiner's staff takes digital dental x-rays, at the direction of a forensic pathologist or Dr. Morgan.
- C. A Forensic Anthropologist can assist in cases of charred and badly decomposed bodies, and in examining skeletal remains.
- D. DNA analysis.
 - Blood cards are obtained on every decedent autopsied at the Medical Examiner's Office. In some cases comparisons are performed by the Washington State Patrol Crime Laboratory. Private laboratories are also utilized.
- E. X-ray comparison of sites such as frontal sinuses, previous surgical fields, etc.
- F. Other methods of identification unique to individuals such as serial number confirmation of implanted orthopedic devices, etc.

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- G. Visual identification is a statistically poor method of identification, is emotionally difficult for family members, and is used only as a last resort, in very rare instances.
- If visual identification is allowed, a Spokane County Medical Examiner Body Identification Form is to be completed and placed in the permanent record.

Once identification is made, and after verbal authorization by the Chief Medical Examiner or Deputy Medical Examiner, the previously unidentified remains are to be tagged with the appropriate name, verifying the case number. The original UDM/UDF label is left on the body. The body release record should be changed to reflect the name so that it reads (for example) UDM or UDF, identified by ME as "_____"

The name tag change should be documented on the Medtrack message board by the person who tagged the decedent with his or her established name.

All other paperwork associated with the case should be changed to reflect that the unidentified person was later identified.

The eventual method of identification should be documented in the autopsy report and permanent case file.

In cases where a body remains unidentified after a two-week period in the Medical Examiner's facility, the following are obtained or completed to the maximum extent possible considering the conditions of the remains (at the earliest opportunity):

- A. Photographs of all regions of the body, with close-up views of the face and of individual characteristics such as tattoos or scars.
- B. The clothing is carefully examined for sizes, labels, and markings. Photographs are taken.
- C. A complete set of 10 fingerprints.
- D. Total body radiographs to include clear views of the frontal sinuses.
- E. Blood samples for potential DNA analysis. A tibial bone sample, or other appropriate bone sample if tibial sampling isn't practical or possible, for DNA.
- F. Dental examination with charting and radiographs.
- G. Forensic anthropologic examination, when appropriate.

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Items A through G above are forwarded to the Washington State Patrol Missing Persons Unit in a format acceptable to that agency. Typically the State Patrol utilizes the FBI's National Crime Information Center (NCIC) registry. This reporting is the responsibility of the Medical Investigator in charge of unidentified remains, in conjunction with the Acting Medical Examiner.

The Office Manager and the Office Assistant-IV are to keep a continuous, running list of unidentified person cases. When the case files for a given year are ready to be sent to the archive site, the case files for all unidentified remains are to be separated and held in the office. The original files for cases of unidentified persons are to be kept on-site until identification is made. When identified, such files are returned to the appropriate archived file.

The Chief Medical Examiner, Deputy Medical Examiner, Staff Assistant, and one Medical Investigator will meet quarterly to review cases of unidentified persons.

References:

Forensic Dentistry

Frank A. Morgan, DDS
14015 E. 42nd Cr.
Veradale, WA 99037
Phone: 509/928-6410 (cell 998-7670)

Forensic Anthropology

Katherine M. Taylor, PhD
King County Medical Examiner Office
325 9th Ave, Box 359792
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Washington State Patrol

Missing/Unidentified Persons Unit
P.O. Box 42633
Olympia, WA 98504-2633
Phone:360/705-512

Sally Aiken, M.D. Date
Forensic Pathologist

John D. Howard, M.D. Date
Forensic Pathologist

Revised: November, 2003; March, 2008

Computer File Name: Identification