**SECTION 7: DECEDENT IDENTIFICATION**

**T I O N 1 9 - UN C LA I ME D O R I N D I G E**

**GENERAL**

All decedents need some type of positive identification. Decedents can be identified by visual methods, circumstantial considerations or by a scientific method.

**VISUAL IDENTIFICATION**

The normal way to identify a decedent is by a family member or friend. Even then, that identification should be corroborated by some type of circumstantial means to guard against possible fraud. Absent a visual identification, all decedents should have at least one means of scientific identification.

**CIRCUMSTANTIAL IDENTIFICATION**

Circumstantial considerations are easy but are the most unreliable and unscientific. Car registrations, driver’s licenses, jewelry, and other personal possessions are items that may be used to perform a circumstantial identification, but those items can be stolen leading to a possible misidentification. For example, a stolen car may have all sorts of personal identifying items in it, for the wrong person.

Circumstantial evidence does have its value in that it may point you towards evidence that is scientifically stable as identification. Circumstantial evidence can point you towards dental charts, fingerprint exemplars, medical records, x-rays tattoos, scars implanted medical devices and DNA samples, all of which are reliable identifiers.

**SCIENTIFIC IDENTIFICATION METHODS**

Do not positively identify a decedent that was not or could not be visually identified without at least one scientific identifier. Scientific methods of identification include fingerprints, radiology, Odontology, DNA, and forensic anthropology as well as others.

1. Fingerprints: The easiest scientific identifier is a fingerprint. Matching the deceased print can be done is several ways. Fingerprints may be obtained by a trained Coroner Investigator or by the assistance of trained law enforcement personnel. Prior to obtaining fingerprints, the Coroner Investigator should use the circumstantial identification, or presumed identification, to determine if fingerprints exist in some record for making a positive identification.
   1. In the event a circumstantial, or presumed identification, has not been made, then the law enforcement agency in charge will make the necessary requests for a fingerprint comparison in national databases. Fingerprints on drowning victims, decomposed or dehydrated remains are more difficult to print but can be done. Contact the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation for advice.
   2. A certified fingerprint examiner should make the comparisons and submit a written finding.
2. X-rays or other radiology: Another identifier is the comparison of postmortem and ante mortem x-rays.
3. Healed, fractured bones, congenital anomalies and some medical implants will all show up on x-ray. Comparison with ante mortem x-rays will yield scientific identification.
4. Odontology: A forensic odonatologist, a specialist in the comparison of dental charting and x-rays with postmortem dentition, can do dental identification. Even a few teeth with unique identifiers will yield a satisfactory scientific identification.
5. DNA: Samples can be obtained from bones, teeth and fingernails on skeletal remains. Samples can also be obtained from internal organs and other tissue on burned or decomposed deceased persons. These samples can be compared with DNA from the maternal side of the deceased family and the identification is usually 99 percent accurate. If family is not known, DNA can be stored and entered a national data base for comparison with DNA samples from missing persons.
6. Forensic anthropology: If nothing is specifically known about the remains, a forensic anthropologist can tell you age, sex, stature, race, some medical history and whether the remains have forensic value or are from an historic burial. Skeletal remains, specifically the skull, can be the basis for a drawing by a forensic artist or a facial reconstruction, both of which have seen success in the identification of deceased persons when the likeness is widely circulated.
7. Other methods: Implanted medical devices with serial numbers are also good for making a scientific identification.