

SECTION 20 – DECEDENT IDENTIFICATION

I. INTRODUCTION

Identification of unknown bodies is an important function of the county coroner 's office and should be considered as important as determining cause and manner of death. Bodies should be identified using one or more methods that are widely recognized and accepted within the medicolegal community. If possible, identification should be determined prior to transport to DFS, but should be firmly established prior to release to a funeral home.

If a body cannot be identified prior to transportation for autopsy, the tag placed on the body should indicate JANE/JOHN DOE, COUNTY OF DEATH, and any other information routinely used C/DC.

If the C/DC has a reasonable suspicion as to the identity of the decedent, that information should be included on the body tag in the format of BTB

II. RECORDING THE METHOD

How a decedent is identified should be documented on the ROD.

When the decedent identification is based on circumstances, a letter from the Coroner &/or Investigating Law Enforcement agency lists reasons why they accept the identification based on circumstances.

Copies of decedent photo ID should be kept in case file.

Identification of the decedent can be accomplished through use of one or more of the following methods:

III. VISUAL/PHOTOGRAPHIC IDENTIFICATION

Visual identification is the most common method currently used, however visual identification alone is considered the least reliable method of identification. Identification of the body may be made by showing a member of the family, a friend, or an individual who knew the decedent well, either the body or a photograph of the body/face. This method should only be used when the decedent is visually recognizable. Information about the person making the identification, to include name, address, contact phone number, and relationship to the decedent, should be documented.

While visual identification is the most common method used for positive identification, it has the greatest potential for error. Persons, even close family members, can make errors in identifying a deceased body. Therefore it is best to include at least other circumstantial information such as “decedent found in own residence, or vehicle”.

IV. SCIENTIFIC IDENTIFICATION

If the decedent is not readily identified by visual means, either due to decomposition or trauma, other scientifically recognized methods should be employed for positive identification. Alternative, accepted methods include fingerprints, antemortem dental records, antemortem medical x-rays, or genetic (DNA) studies.

Homicide cases require scientific identification.

All burned, decomposed or otherwise unidentifiable decedents

Fingerprint Identification is an excellent method of identification as long as the person has a fingerprint record on file. When the decomposition process is advanced fingerprints may be difficult or impossible to obtain.

Local law enforcement or ALEA may be able to provide assistance in printing difficult cases.

If local law enforcement requests to fingerprint the body prior to autopsy, the Coroner should be notified in order to give authorization.

Print identification can only be verified through Hoover PD or ALEA. Both of these agencies are IAI certified.

Dental Identification of an unidentified body requires the presence of antemortem dental records, the written record, and dental x-rays (bite-wings, panoramic). The record of the known person can be compared to the dentition of the deceased for positive identification. As soon as it is suspected that dental identification may be required, a search for antemortem dental records should begin. Antemortem dental information should be forwarded to ALDFS performing the postmortem examination. ALDFS will then contact the BC Forensic Odontologist for comparison.

Radiographic Identification can be employed when antemortem x-rays are available and show remote skeletal fracture(s), unique skeletal anomalies, lesions, old and un-recovered projectiles, prior medical or surgical intervention and prosthesis. Antemortem x-ray information should be forwarded to the regional forensic center performing the postmortem examination. Decedent radiographs shall be performed through ALDFS.

DNA Identification can be used to establish the positive identification of a deceased person. Comparison can be made directly (for example, comparing DNA from the hairs contained on a hairbrush of a known person to a DNA sample obtained from the body), or by comparison with a relative's DNA. Specimens considered suitable for DNA comparison include dried blood, hair with roots, tissue, bone marrow, and sometimes from teeth. Blood dried on DNA blotter paper or an FTA bloodstain card is the specimen of choice.

DNA identification is only performed by ALDFS.

Presumed Identification

If positive identification cannot be made via visual or scientific means, then a presumptive or circumstantial identification may be possible. Circumstantial evidence may include, but is not limited to, ID on body, jewelry, scars, and tattoos, location of body within a residence or vehicle, and anthropological data. Circumstantial evidence must be carefully considered and, if you feel the circumstantial evidence is not strong enough to be sure of identify, you can prepare the death certificate with the qualifying phrase "Presumed To Be".

V. UNKNOWN OR UNIDENTIFIED DECEDENT

A body that is unidentified should never be cremated until a positive identification has been established. A body that is unidentified can be embalmed and buried, once information has been collected that may aid in future positive identification.

The list of information includes, but is not limited to : height, weight, approximate age, gender, race (ancestry), hair characteristics (color, length, style, etc.), eye color, description and color photos of all tattoos, amputations, scars, and prosthetics, clothing record (items, colors, labels, sizes) to include color photographs, jewelry descriptions to include color photographs, street names or nicknames, fingerprints, dental exam with chart and dental x-rays, other x-rays (if indicated), DNA specimen(s), and anthropology consultation/autopsy. Copies of all information collected should be maintained as a part of the permanent coroner record until identification has been established.

All details collected about the decedent should be entered into NAMUS by the Coroner. If individuals parts/remains are found, they should be entered into NAMUS.

These cases shall be reviewed annually by the Coroner until identification is established.

Commingling of remains is prohibited, unless all next of kin agree upon the disposition of such. Scientific identification must confirm parts/remains are from the same individual.