The involvement of the forensic anthropologist in human rights issues

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Abstract
The theme chosen for the 2001 American Academy of Forensic Sciences meeting, War Crimes and Other Acts Against Humanity, has highlighted the recent involvement of scientists in the investigation of gross human rights violations. Genocide, political murders, and mass killings rage throughout the world: Rwanda, Bosnia, the former Yugoslavia, Serbia, and Kosovo being only the most recent examples. Forensic anthropology is a field that was established to aid in the identification of human remains once visual recognition is lost. Most often this applies to medico-legal investigations of unexplained deaths. Of recent, however, forensic anthropologists have become involved in identifying the remains and documenting evidence of torture of victims of violent political massacres found in mass graves worldwide. Some of their work has resulted in the successful prosecution of those responsible for the killings, but most often it is to provide a sense of closure for the survivors through identification of the dead, as many of the survivors have lived for years without knowing the fate of their loved ones. With the exception of Karen Burns’ chapter in Forensic Osteology (see Burns 1998), there has not been a comprehensive record of the involvement of forensic anthropologists in human rights issues. With this research, I hope to survey what publications there are in this area, including information drawn from primary sources’ websites, with my own experience working for the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation. This study explores the role of the forensic anthropologist in human rights issues including the pioneers in the field and the organizations with which they are involved. A discussion of the major areas of involvement, such as Argentina, Guatemala, the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, is also provided as well as the methods used. Also, interaction with the local community and documentation and collection of evidence is presented drawing from my experience in Guatemala. Lastly, the impact of the exhumation process on relevant regions is mentioned along with the resulting legal trials. The future of this area of involvement is also advanced.

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