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Forensic Odontology

Dental Identification Problems in the Abu Dhabi Air Accident

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The forensic odontological examination of 112 victims in the 1983 air accident near Abu Dhabi is described with particular reference to the problems encountered in the age assessment of the 26 children, and serves to illustrate that dental identification in aviation accidents may be of only limited application in Asian victims. Following this accident, other means of identification had misguidedly been removed by the recovery teams. Of those identified, half were by dental means alone, but this amounted to only 6.24% of the total number of victims
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On September 23, 1983, a Gulf Air Boeing 737, flight number 771, departed routinely from Karachi en route to the Gulf States. Of the 112 persons on board the aircraft, there were 107 passengers and five crew members. One passenger was a British male resident of Switzerland; the remaining passengers were of Pakistani origin, six of British nationality. The crew consisted of a flight deck crew of Arab origin and two British stewardesses.

After the aircraft had been reported overdue at Abu Dhabi, a search and rescue operation was put into effect. Several hours later, the wreckage was found in the desert between Dubai and Abu Dhabi (Fig. 1). There were no survivors.

Recovery operations were hampered by the desert terrain, bodies being removed to a number of separate mortuaries either by helicopter or by the military and police forces using four-wheel drive and tracked vehicles (Fig. 2).

Gulf Air, in company with a number of the world's airlines, retains a British funeral director specializing in air accident identification and body repatriation for such emergencies. The team arrived from the United Kingdom the next day, accompanied by a British aviation pathologist retained by the airline. The initial team consisted of a team manager; an aviation pathologist; a forensic odontologist; experts in the interpretation of documents, jewelry, and clothing for identification purposes; and embalmers. Once the death toll had been established and the local facilities and problems assessed, it was deemed necessary to increase the number of embalmers from the U.K.

Local assistance was limited to secretarial help and some porterage between the main mortuary and other hospital mortuaries in Abu Dhabi. Within the mortuary itself there was no local professional help—neither medical nor dental.

On receipt of the passenger list, it immediately became apparent that the majority on board were Pakistani. Under the direction of the identification team,

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