

## The Certification and Disposal of the Dead in Major Disasters

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### ABSTRACT

When a major disaster occurs in which there are a large number of fatalities, many tasks have to be undertaken in a very short time and under great pressure. By considering in advance the potential difficulties which may be encountered it is possible to plan ways of overcoming, or at least minimizing, some of these problems.

In this paper we have ventilated some of the problems concerning the certification and disposal of the victims of a major disaster, as seen from the pathologist's point of view

### INTRODUCTION

Following the recent dramatic increase in the number and variety of major disasters in the United Kingdom we feel it is appropriate to discuss some of the medico-legal problems which may be encountered when multiple deaths have occurred. We specifically deal with the certification and disposal of the dead as seen from the viewpoint of the pathologist. By ventilating these problems now it is hoped that medical and legal investigators will be able to consider them in a calm atmosphere, rather than having to face a catastrophic situation when immediate decisions might have to be taken under great pressure. The publication of first-hand experiences in dealing with such matters (Sturt, 1988; Sivaloganathan and Green, 1989) can only help towards the creation of a national major disaster policy, suggested by Shepherd (1990), and now in process of being defined by the police (ACPO Emergency Procedure Manual) and by the Royal College of Pathologists (Busuttill and Jones, 1990).

### DEATH CERTIFICATION

From the point of view of Her Majesty's Coroners and of Procurators Fiscal it is necessary for them to issue a death certificate as soon as possible, so that the bereaved relatives can formally register the death, and make arrangements for the disposal of the remains in accordance with their particular wishes, customs and religious beliefs. Undoubtedly, the death certificate is an important legal document which will need to be referred to in subsequent inquests and public enquiries. It will also be used in civil litigation proceedings for the award of possible compensation or damages, in insurance and state-directed claims for death benefits, and in a variety of other circumstances, particularly when the disaster is a multinational one.

As with every other aspect of the investigation following a major disaster, this part of the exercise is fraught with its own particular problems. Careful pre-planning and implementation of that plan at the actual time of the disaster should ensure that the procedure for death certification is carried out smoothly and efficiently, to the satisfaction of all the parties involved, not least the bereaved relatives and the legal authorities

The main problems to be addressed are:

1. The identification of each body
2. The cause of death (to be of sufficient accuracy to enable a death certificate to be issued, and for the disposal of the body to take place).