IDENTIFICATION OF MASS CASUALTIES: EXPERIENCE IN FOUR CIVIL AIR DISASTERS*

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The methods of identification of casualties in mass disasters are described in four aircraft accidents and their relative usefulness and limitations assessed. There are difficulties peculiar to aircraft accidents but also facts which tend to facilitate the task. Since the medical aspects of an aircraft accident should always be fully investigated and the post-mortem examination of fatalities is of supreme importance, it is logical that the pathologists should take charge of the identification as an essential part of the investigation.

THE accurate identification of the remains of victims of disasters of all kinds is a public duty [1]; although its importance has been repeatedly stressed,[2, 3] we feel that this aspect of the investigation of aircraft accidents in remote areas may not have received adequate emphasis. There are additional reasons for securing accurate identification in the case of an aircraft accident. These relate to the medical investigations undertaken to determine any possible medical cause of the accident, to assess the exact causes of death of the passengers in relation to their seating position, orientation and escape facilities and to disclose factors relating to survivability and flight safety.[4]

We have recently conducted the medical investigation of four major civil transport aircraft accidents occurring abroad which serve as a base on which to re-emphasise the importance of aircraft casualty identification, to assess the relative values of the standard means of identification in these circumstances and to draw attention to some problems of particular interest that we have experienced.

Accident No. 1. A British aircraft struck the side of a mountain at over 100 knots and disintegrated; all occupants were killed. They comprised two pilots, a stewardess, two male adults and thirty-four male children of between 12–14 years of age. There was extensive mutilation of all bodies, but only a limited post-crash fire.

Accident No. 2. A British aircraft carrying thirty-four passengers

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