



Role of Dentistry in Forensics: a Historical Review

KEYWORDS

Forensic dentistry, Identification, Dental Records

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ABSTRACT

Forensic odontology, or forensic dentistry, is one of the most unexplored and intriguing branches of forensic sciences. It primarily deals with identification, based on recognition of unique features present in individual's dental structures. This paper includes all the cases till now where forensic dentistry played a role in identification or investigation.

INTRODUCTION

Establishing the identity of a living person may seem like an easy task; the person, or their friends or family, can simply be asked their name or other identification marks can be used for his/her identification. While in case of death, a body may be too disfigured due to trauma to allow for easy identification. This is common in case of high velocity crashes (e.g. cars, airplanes), fires, explosions or decomposed skeletal remains. Though sometimes difficult, identification remains a necessary task. Living individuals for whom identification is required may include wanted criminals attempting to elude custody, amnesia victims, comatose victims, victims of disfiguring trauma or persons who require identity confirmation following identity theft. Deceased individuals requiring identification may include homeless individuals, undocumented immigrants, burned bodies, decomposed or skeletal remains & individuals who sustained significant facial trauma that precludes visual identification¹.

Forensic is derived from the latin word 'forum' which means 'court of law'. Odontology refers to the study of teeth. Forensic odontology, is therefore, has been defined by **Federation Dentaire International (FDI)** as "that branch of dentistry which, in the trust of justice, deals with the proper handling and examination of dental evidence, and with proper evaluation and preservation of oral findings". Forensic Odontology, or forensic dentistry, was defined by **Keiser-Neilson in 1970** as "that branch of forensic medicine which in the interest of justice deals with the proper handling and examination of dental evidence and with the proper evaluation and presentation of the dental findings."²

Forensic dentistry plays an important role in identification in manmade or natural disasters- events that result in multiple fatalities may not be identifiable through conventional methods³. Age estimation of the living as well as of cadavers relies heavily on data regarding growth and developmental stages of the individual as obtained from dental and skeletal radiographs.

SIGNIFICANCE OF DENTAL RECORDS AS A EVIDENCE

The diversity of dental characteristics is wide, making each dentition unique. The dental enamel is the hardest tissue in the body, and would thus withstand peri- and post-mortem damages, and so would dental materials adjoined to teeth. Being diverse and resistant to environmental challenges, teeth are considered excellent post-mortem material for identification with enough concordant points to

make a meaningful comparison⁴.

FORENSIC DENTISTRY TILL NOW

Identification by dental means is not a new technique. It has been said that **Nero's mistress, Sabina, in 66 A.D.**, satisfied herself that the head presented to her on a platter was Nero's wife as she was able to recognize a black anterior tooth⁵. In **1193, Jai Chand**, the Raja of Kanauji, was murdered after being taken prisoner and was identified by his false teeth when he was found among those slain. Similarly the Earl of Shrewsbury was killed in the battle of **Castillon in 1453**. His herald was able to identify him by his teeth⁶.

Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, after inheriting additional lands, decided to create an independent state between France and Germany. He was killed in the battle of Nancy in **1477** while trying to accomplish the task. The Duke's page was able to identify him according to his dentition, as he had lost some teeth in a fall years previously⁷.

In **Boston in 1776**, at the battle for Breed's Hill, Dr. Joseph Warren was killed. His face was unrecognizable as he suffered a fatal head wound. His dentist identified the decaying body of Dr. Warren by the small denture that he had fabricated for him. The denture was carved in ivory and was held in place by silver wires. The identification made it possible to bury Dr. Warren with full military honors on April 8, 1776⁸.

The first case of forensic dental age estimation can be traced back to **1846**, when **Dr. Recamier** examined the teeth of a skeleton to solve the dispute related to the death of & identification of Prince Louis XVII in 1795 at the age of ten years two months from advanced tuberculosis of the lymph nodes (scrofula). All 28 teeth were present & third molars could be seen at the time of examination concluding that age is between fifteen or sixteen years. Dr. Recamier's age assessment was accepted and the body was reinterred in an unmarked place. The quest for the Dauphin continued and in 1897, a relative of Louis XVII gained permission to again search for the coffin. A coffin was found that contained the skeleton of a young male. Based on tooth development, three experts aged the remains at between sixteen years plus and eighteen years plus. It was concluded the remains were not those of the Dauphin⁹. The modern forensic case started in 1897 in disaster victim identification in Paris by a general dentist⁴.

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