

The Journal of the Michigan Dental Association

Volume 106 | Number 7

Article 4

7-1-2024

The MDA Forensic Dental Team Needs More Volunteers

Patrick Houlihan DDS

General Dentist, Novi M, phoulihan11@msn.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.ada.org/journalmichigandentalassociation>



Part of the [Dental Public Health and Education Commons](#), [Forensic Science and Technology Commons](#), [Health Law and Policy Commons](#), [Human Resources Management Commons](#), [Leadership Commons](#), and the [Other Dentistry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Houlihan, Patrick DDS (2024) "The MDA Forensic Dental Team Needs More Volunteers," *The Journal of the Michigan Dental Association*: Vol. 106: No. 7, Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.ada.org/journalmichigandentalassociation/vol106/iss7/4>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State & Local Dental Publications at ADACommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Michigan Dental Association by an authorized editor of ADACommons. For more information, please contact commons@ada.org.

The MDA Forensic Dental Team Needs More Volunteers

By Patrick Houlihan, DDS

After the Twin Towers fell in New York City on Sept. 11, 2001, my dental school classmate Brian Murphy and I began to ask each other one simple question: What could we do to help? Our first thought was to sign up with the U.S. military, as reservists. It turns out that the military frowns on 45-year-old dentists enlisting. So, we discussed possible ways to contribute to the overwhelming needs of the victims and the nation as a whole. Brian and I concluded that using the unique skills we had acquired as dentists would be an effective and resourceful way to be of service. The next step was finding the right venue. After extensive research and thought, in 2004 we were made aware of the Michigan Dental Association Forensic Dental Identification Team, or MDA-FDIT.

MDA-FDIT was created by Dr. Allan Warnick in the early 1980s to be a forensic dental identification team ready for anything, and at the forefront of developing policies and plans in the state of Michigan for natural and man-made disasters. Since its inception, MDA-FDIT has been tasked along with our partners from the state to help provide planning and training for calamities like the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the COVID-19 pandemic. We in the dental community, because of our dental knowledge and training, are vital in disaster victim identification in a mass-casualty situation. MDA-FDIT was created to fill a vital need in planning and carrying out a response system in times of unforeseen disasters.

The story of MDA-FDIT

When Northwest Flight 255 crashed upon takeoff from Detroit Metropolitan Airport in August 1987, positive

identification of the victims became the No. 1 priority after the search-and-rescue teams finished their work. It was confirmed that there were 155 deceased passengers, crew, and people on the ground, and that a 4-year-old girl strapped in her seat was the sole survivor. DNA identification had not been developed yet, and other identification techniques, such as visual identification, were less than ideal considering the traumatic nature of the victims' remains.

Passenger manifests along with personal effects located on or near a victim had been shown to not be a reliable method to identify victims. It became apparent that identification using dental records would be one of the most effective and accurate methods available. Positive proof of victim identity was needed due to various factors. Providing some closure for the families of the victims and returning the remains of their loved ones was the No. 1 reason that required this iron-clad identification method. Other factors needed to be taken into consideration as well. The crash was a potential crime scene, where evidence preservation was required. This meant that meticulous record-keeping and extensive documentation would be needed. Undoubtedly there would be questions of lawsuits and insurance claims, and none of that could proceed or be resolved without first confirming identification and the manner of death for victims.

Thus, identification through the use of dental records became the primary method of victim identification. The aftermath of the crash of Flight 255 was a chaotic scene, but because of the existence of the MDA FDIT team the task of identification was able to be completed for Flight

The MDA Forensic Dental Identification Team has an impressive record of service to the public and the profession and has been widely recognized for the important role it plays in identification of both individual victims and those of mass disasters. Perhaps you'll want to consider joining your colleagues and assisting in these critical services.

255, and all of the victims were identified.

The MDA FDIT was once again activated after the crash of Comair flight 3272 in 1997, once again assisting in the identification of the victims. Today, after more than 40 years of enhancement and refinement, MDA-FIT is now one of the best mass casualty identification teams in the country.

In 2006 the state of Michigan's MIMORT was formed and incorporated the Michigan Dental Association's FDIT into it as one of its many components. MIMORT is the Michigan Mortuary Response team, with more than 250 members in several different categories. While dental personnel and funeral directors make up the largest component of MIMORT, other members come from law enforcement (local, state, and federal), state mass casualty planning teams, and many other skill areas. While MDA-FDIT has the task of remains identification along with the DNA section in a mass casualty situation, MIMORT is tasked with handling the remains and facilitating the repatriated remains to their respective families, in addition to working on victim identification.

Since its formation, many of the MDA-FDIT members have been also become members of the Federal DMORT (Disaster Mortuary Response Team) and have been instrumental in providing support to numerous mass casualty situations. Among those were New York City after 9/11 as well as New Orleans and Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. In addition, MDA-FDIT members have responded to a multitude of smaller-scale disasters, such as skydiving accidents and smaller plane crashes. Team members also assisted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because of the accuracy and prevalence of dental records, we in the dental profession are in a unique position to make quick, accurate, and cost-effective identification of the vic-

(Continued on Page 38)



MIMORT meeting before receiving COVID-19 victims.



Preparing to receive COVID-19 victims.



Equipment used for COVID-19 deployment.



Demonstrating use of the NOMAD X-ray.

Forensic Dental Team (Continued from Page 37)

tims of calamitous events. Provided that dental team members have access to the antemortem (before death) dental records of a victim along with any written dental documentation, radiographs then can be taken after the event (postmortem) which will allow for victim identification to be confirmed quickly and easily without the reliance on complex technology. All that is required is a portable radiography machine and a laptop computer.

In August 2023, two MDA-FDIT members were deployed with FBI agents during Project United to assist in helping to identify and repatriate the unidentified remains of Detroit homicide victims from the 1970s and 1980s, along with their families. Their dental expertise obtained through their experiences with MDA-FDIT enabled law enforcement to identify remains that were buried in common graves, so that samples of skeletal remains could be isolated, and then DNA extracted and compared with ancestral DNA to identify these crime victims.

In addition, MDA-FDIT members have worked with local, state, and federal law enforcement in criminal cases. Our members work with most of the individual medical examiner offices throughout the state. When you see a news report that a victim in the state of Michigan who perished as a result of a automobile crash, fire, or other form of fatality was identified through dental records, one of the members of MDA-FDIT has performed that duty.

MDA-FDIT is a volunteer organization, and the team is currently comprised of approximately 80 members statewide. The team includes dentists, dental hygienists, and dental assistants, along with administrative personnel. If you work in a dental of-

fice with patients, you have the skills necessary to be part of MDA-FDIT. Training sessions are held regularly, and MDA-FDIT also conducts full-scale mock exercises with the state of Michigan MIMORT team every other year.

Looking ahead

What is the future of MDA-FDIT, and will we be needed with the further refinement of DNA analysis? I have sat through numerous discussions with our team members on this very subject. Despite what you see on TV shows such as NCIS, DNA has not and most likely will not render dental identification obsolete in the future. First of all, DNA analysis takes time, in most cases weeks rather than minutes to perform. It is costly, and the methods of collection and analysis are better-handled in a sterile lab rather than a muddy field next to an airport runway or in the autopsy room of your local morgue. And, as we are constantly reminded by our law enforcement partners, it is not a matter of “if” but “when” the next mass casualty situation will happen. We train to be ready so that we can

(Continued on Page 40)



U.S. flag was hung in processing area as a sign of respect for COVID-19 victims.



The MDA Forensic Dental Identification Team posed for a group photo at a forensic conference in 2021. (Photo: Dave Trumpie.)

Forensic Dental Team

(Continued from Page 39)

provide the greatest service to those in need. It is always our hope that we will never see another natural or man-made catastrophic event, but the reality is never that ideal. The members of MDA-FDIT are trained and ready for the next time we are needed. We take pride and comfort in the benefits we provide to the community.

I am proud to be a member of MDA-FDIT and very proud to lead this group of dedicated dental profession-

als of the Michigan Dental Association-Forensic Identification Team. I have had the opportunity to meet and develop relationships with some of the leading forensic experts in Michigan and the United States as a whole. I have also had the good fortune to receive thank-you notes from victims' families — people I never met — because they were grateful to have the closure they sought concerning their loved one due to an identification that we made. Our members have given advice and counsel in criminal cases and have had an impact on seeing a guilty par-

ty brought to justice. I have attended forensic conferences in many cities and had a direct impact on emergency preparedness in our state.

If you are looking for an avenue where you can use your dental expertise and make a contribution to this country and your fellow citizens, MDA-FDIT team membership may be for you. We are looking for committed dental professionals who want to make a difference, and who can continue this important work.

To obtain more information or to join the team, please contact Kesha Dixon on the MDA staff at kdixon@michigandental.org or at 517-346-9452. You also may contact me directly at phoulihan11@msn.com. I would be happy to talk with you about serving on MDA-FDIT.

Come join us! ●



Part of the dental component for the COVID-19 response. (from left): Dr. Gary Berman, Dr. Brian Murphy, Dr. Patrick Houlihan.

About the Author

Patrick Houlihan, DDS, is director of the MDA Forensic Dental Identification Team. He is also a member of the Dental Forensic Unit of Homeland Securities for mass disasters within Michigan and the United States. In private practice since 1983, he has been involved in dental consulting and practice transitions for more than 20 years, and is a frequent guest lecturer for the MDA, for the University of Detroit Mercy and University of Michigan schools of dentistry, and for other groups. He resides in Novi.



Houlihan