

The Newsletter of the International Academy of Legal Medicine



Dear Members,

I hope that the year has started well. The big hassle of the beginning of the New Year – and the new millennium, depending what calendar one prefers – lies already a few months back. For the IALM this is a special year because in September the 18th International Congress of the IALM takes place in Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain. The Congress President Prof. Luis Concheiro and the Co-President Prof. Angel Carracedo, along with the Organizing Committee and the IALM Board, wish to meet as many of you there as possible. You will find the outlines of the Scientific and Social Programmes and other useful information on the Congress Website, the address of which you will find in the diary of future congresses at the end of this newsletter.

During congresses we have good opportunities to hear the latest news as to what has been happening in different parts of the world within the medicolegal community. One of the purposes of this newsletter is to provide a forum for the exchange of similar information. I think quite a few of our readers would like to have some idea what is going on in the world of legal medicine. However, the past few years have shown that the threshold of sending this kind of information for the newsletter seems to be so high that we have not been able to publish the newsletter as often as we would have preferred. Once again I would like to encourage members to send us information and news from their university departments or national medicolegal associations.

P. Saukko, Secretary

Contributions to this newsletter should be sent to:

Prof. P. Saukko, Department of Forensic Medicine, University of Turku, Kiinamyllynkatu 10, FIN-20520 Turku, Finland
Tel.: (+358)-2-3337543; Fax: (+358)-2-3337600; e-mail: psaukko@utu.fi

Unidentified cadavers and human remains in the EU: an unknown issue

C. Cattaneo¹ · S. Ritz-Timme² · H. W. Schutz² · M. Collins³ · E. Waite³ · H. Boormann⁴ · M. Grandi¹ · H. J. Kaatsch²

¹ Istituto di Medicina Legale e delle Assicurazioni, Università degli Studi, via Mangiagalli 37, 20133 Milan, Italy

² Institut für Rechtsmedizin, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel, Arnold-Heller-Strasse 12, 24105 Kiel, Germany

³ Fossil Fuels and Environmental Geochemistry, Drummond Building, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

⁴ Faculty of Odontology, Goteborg University, Medicinargatan 12, 41390 Göteborg, Sweden

The identification of cadavers and human remains represents a growing problem in countries of the EU for a number of reasons, the main ones being the increase in immigration of persons from outside the EU and altered social habits of native Europeans, due to the weakening of family ties and loss of contact with relatives.

This brief report stems from the authors' (all of whom work for or collaborate with forensic and legal authorities) realisation that the problem of unidentified bodies is on the increase in their countries of origin, that in many countries it is hugely underestimated or, even worse, ignored, and that there is no legal or bureaucratic authority or organised body which efficiently compares, for each country, data collected from missing persons files with those from medico-legal or anthropological reports on unidentified cadavers/human remains.

Let us take the example of Milan. In 1995, with the creation of a Forensic Anthropology and Odontology Laboratory for the identification of human remains at the Institute of Legal Medicine, it slowly became obvious year after year that there was indeed a problem with the number of unidentified human remains/cadavers. The Institute of Legal Medicine in Milan is one of the institutes with a greater number of autopsies in Italy (ca. 1000 every year) and therefore should be an adequate marker, on a statistical basis, of the

extent of the problem in Italy. The number of unidentified cadavers and human remains which have reached the Institute of Milan in the past 5 years is alarming, ca. 30 every year (over 100 in the past 5 years), only half of which are identified at much later stages. The problem appears to be seriously underestimated or even ignored by the police and by the legal authorities. This is mainly due to the lack of a system which allows personal details of missing persons to be compared with personal details of unidentified cadavers. Milan has seen several paradoxical cases in which young adults have disappeared, been reported missing and found dead only a few days later, but have been identified only months or years later. These cases would have been solved easily and quickly with a cross-match between data on missing persons and unidentified cadavers/human remains. Even in the cases of badly preserved corpses, some personal descriptors (e.g. sex, age, race, dental reparations) can still be obtained with special anthropological, odontological, biochemical, or genetic expertise and, if the system allows it, compared to similar information on missing persons.

We decided to try to study the extent of the problem at a European level by sending a questionnaire to the Central Police Headquarters (Interpol Offices) of each country of the EU. In this questionnaire, data on the number of cases of unidentified bodies/human remains under study per year

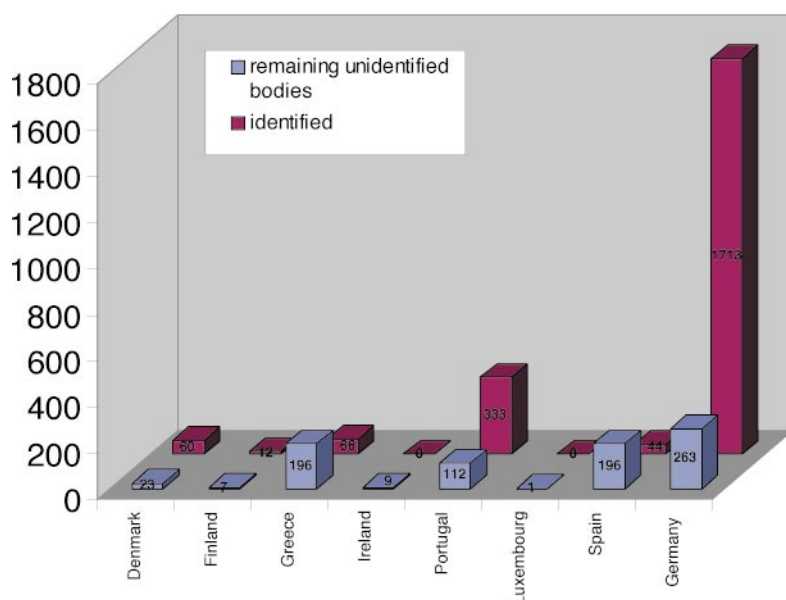


Fig. 1 Solved and unsolved cases of unidentified human remains/cadavers in eight countries of the EU between 1994 and 1998

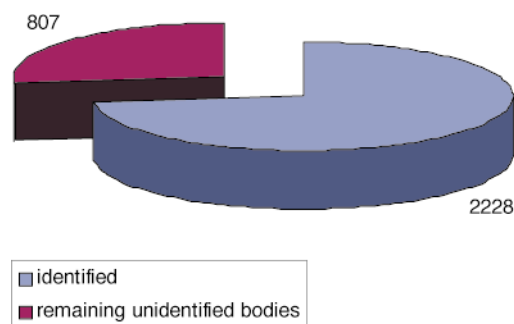


Fig. 2 Total number of cases of unidentified human remains in eight countries of the EU between 1994 and 1998: cases identified and cases still remaining unidentified

(from 1994 to 1998) and data on the number still remaining unidentified were requested.

The results were alarming. First of all, only eight countries responded in full (Denmark, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Luxembourg, Spain and Germany) (Fig. 1). Austria gave data only on the total number of unidentified bodies (739). Others did not respond; some admitted unofficially that such data are not known.

Figure 1 shows the global figures for the 5 years concerned. Among the eight countries that responded, a total of 3035 cases were counted; and ca. 800 still remain unidentified. One should keep in mind though that an absolute definition of "identification" or of minimum requirements for identification does not exist. Therefore, some countries will have accepted, for example, a body as "identified" only according to circumstantial evidence. Figure 2 shows the extent of the problem between 1994 and 1998 for each country.

From the figures, one can see that countries with larger populations, such as Spain and Greece, have a greater problem; the "largest" percentage of remaining unidentified bodies can be seen in Portugal. Nonetheless, some countries with smaller numbers of unidentified bodies show that 100% of these cases are unsolved.

This brief resumé of information only shows the tip of the iceberg in our opinion. Germany (as can be seen by the high number of solved cases) and some Scandinavian countries apparently have an efficient system for the identification of human remains. The status of the identification of human remains is, however, clearly unsatisfactory at a European level. There may be numerous reasons for this: the lack of personnel with training in identification techniques along

with the lack of a protocol forcing forensic pathologist to systematically collect and register personal descriptors and other informative data from cadavers; the lack of a central National/European database in which to convey such data in order to cross-match it with data on missing persons; scarce, ambiguous and inadequate legal directives within the criminal and civil code concerning the issue of identification and consequent inadequate actions on the part of investigating authorities.

All these problems must be dealt with in order to attain maximum and efficient identification of human remains, particularly if we recall the legal and ethical importance of identification. Identification of a cadaver in fact is mandatory not only for ethical but also for legal reasons, if we consider the implications in criminal law (for example the need to identify a murder victim in order to adequately pursue criminal investigations) as well as in civil law (of insurance and of administrative nature), all related to the assessment and declaration of the death of a person.

Thus the issue of identification, even from a legal point of view, is still far from being a correct and thorough approach. Furthermore, an even more serious issue is the accepted mode of identification of human remains: magistrates often have confused ideas about which scientific methods should be accepted for identification, which leads sometimes to positive identification being performed only on the basis of personal belongings. This behaviour may also encourage voluntary forgery of identity documents among illegal immigrants, leading to the offence of "substitution of person".

In conclusion, this brief report shows the nature of the problem in eight countries of the EU and how the problem is ignored by most countries and/or dealt with inadequately. This information, we hope, will be sufficient motivation for authorities to acknowledge the problem, study it further in depth, and arrange-, at a European level, a protocol for registering and conveying information on unidentified human remains and cadavers into a centralised system. We trust that the International Academy of Legal Medicine will support this "crusade" by encouraging the European Commission and European Council to take such a problem into serious consideration.

Acknowledgements We thank the representatives of all eight countries who kindly volunteered full information.

DIARY OF FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN, May 22–26, 2000

15th International Conference on Alcohol, Drugs and Traffic Safety

Further information: Conference Secretariat, c/o The Swedish National Road Admin., SE-781 87 Borlänge, Sweden

Phone: +46-243-75100; Fax: +46-243-75825, E-mail: t2000@vv.se

STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN, May 28–31, 2000

IAATM 2000, 17TH World Congress of the International Association for Accident and Traffic Medicine

Further information: Congress Secretariat: IAATM 2000, P.O. Box 23201 SE- 104 35 Stockholm, Sweden

Tel. & Fax: +46-8-30-25-07; E-mail: secretary@iaatm2000.com;

Internet: <http://www.ki.se/cnsf/iaatm2000/index.html>

HELSINKI, FINLAND, August, 13–17, 2000

38th International Meeting of The International Association of Forensic Toxicologists (T.I.A.F.T.)

Further Information: Dr. Ilkka Ojanperä, Department of Forensic Medicine, PO Box 40,

FIN-00014, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Tel.: +358-9-19127487; Fax: +358-19127518

E-mail: ilkka.ojanpera@helsinki.fi; Internet: <http://www.tiaft.org/tiaft2000/index.html>

VANCOUVER, CANADA, AUGUST 16–20, 2000

5th International Conference in Clinical Forensic Medicine of the World Police Medical Officers

Further information: WPMO2000, 568-999 Canada Place, Vancouver, BC, Canada, V6C 3E1

Tel.: +1-604-6887035, Fax: +1-604-6887031, E-mail: aschmitt@istar.ca

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA, GALICIA – SPAIN, SEPTEMBER 6–9, 2000

XVIII Congress of the International Academy of Legal Medicine (IALM)

Further information: Organizing Secretariat: Victoria Lareu, Institute of Legal Medicine,

C/San Francisco, s/n, 15704 Santiago de Compostela

Tel.: +34-81-582327; Fax: +34-81-580336; E-mail: apimllar@usc.es; Internet: <http://www.usc.es/implus/doc/doc/ialm.htm>

CRACOW, POLAND, SEPTEMBER, 12–16, 2000

Second European Academy of Forensic Science Meeting

Further information: Aleksander Glazek, Institute of Forensic Research, PL 31-033 Krakow, ul. Westerplatte 9, Poland

Tel.: +48-12-4228755 (ext. 160), Fax: +48-12-4223850

E-mail: seafsm@ies.krakow.pl; Internet: <http://www.ies.krakow.pl/konferencje/enfsi/index.htm>

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA, SEPTEMBER 16–21, 2001

7th Indo-Pacific Congress on Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (INPALMS)

Further information: Prof. Stephen Cordner, Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine,

57-83 Kavanagh Street, Southbank Victoria 3006, Australia

Tel.: +61-3-96844444; Fax: +61-3-96827353

E-mail: Stephen@vifp.monash.edu.au, Internet: <http://www.vifp.monash.edu.au/inpalms2001>

MONTPELLIER, FRANCE, SEPTEMBER 1–7, 2002

16th Meeting of the International Association of Forensic Sciences

Further information: Societe Internationale de Congres et Services, 337, rue de la Combe Caude, 34090 Montpellier, France

Tel.: +33-4-67635340; Fax: +33-4-67419427; E-mail: algcsi@mnet.fr

REGGIO CALABRIA, ITALY, SEPTEMBER, 2002

International Symposium Advances in Legal Medicine

Further information: SIMEF, Via Nico 16 da Reggio 4, 89128 Reggio Calabria, Italy,

Tel.: +39-965-891184, Fax: +39-965-891125, E-mail: SIMEF@diel.it, <http://www.diel.it/simef>

TAKAYAMA, JAPAN, OCTOBER 1–4, 2002

5th International Symposium Advances in Legal Medicine (ISALM 2002)

Further information: Secretariat for Fifth ISALM, c/o Plando Japan Inc., Umeda Dai-ichi Bldg. 8F,

2-12-7 Sonezaki, Kita-ku, Osaka 530-0057, Japan

Tel.: +81-6-63120461; Fax: +81-6-63120462

E-mail: cf4m-nsmr@asahi-net.or.jp; Internet: <http://www.gifu-u.ac.jp/~isalm5/index.html>



**ACADÉMIE INTERNATIONALE DE MÉDECINE LÉGALE
INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY OF LEGAL MEDICINE**

APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

Secretary

Prof. P. Saukko
Department of Forensic Medicine
University of Turku
Kiinamyllynkatu 10
FIN-20520 Turku
Tel.: +358-2-333-7543
Fax: +358-2-333-7600

Treasurer

Prof. W. Bär
Institut für Rechtsmedizin
Universität Zürich-Irchel
Winterthurerstr. 190/Bau 52
CH-8057 Zürich
Tel.: +41-1-635-5611
Fax: +41-1-635-6815

Family name **First name** **Block letters**

Maiden name **or**

Title(s) **typewritten**

Address for correspondence:

Institution:

Telephone:

Fax:

Important: Recommended by: 1)

2)

Brief curriculum vitae:

I promise to comply with the Constitution of the Academy and to settle my dues when the call is made. In case of non-payment my name will be deleted from the list of members.

Date: _____ **Signature:** _____