

The Mediterranean shipwreck of April 18 2015: challenges in the postmortem examination of the victims

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Background and Aims. On the 18th of April 2015, one of the largest shipwrecks in the Mediterranean sea occurred with around 800 gone missing. Among European indifference and inactivity, the Italian Government created a task force, through the will of the Commissioner's Office of Missing Persons, the Italian Navy, the Prefecture of Siracusa, the Police, the Military Red Cross and the University of Milano flanked by the Universities of Catania, Palermo and Messina and other 10 Universities for the recovery and the identification of these victims in a challenging scenario where collection of post-mortem and ante-mortem data is very difficult respectively because of the conditions of the bodies and the political situation of the countries of provenance of the victims as well as the dispersal of their relatives and loved ones all over the world. According to the DVI protocols, identification relies mainly upon primary (genetic, fingerprint, teeth) criteria, but previous experience on the Lampedusa disaster has proven that such criteria may not guarantee high success rates. Personal descriptors of faces (ante-mortem photographs) are becoming more and more important.

Materials and Methods. Since July 2015, 69 body bags bodies have been recovered around the wreck e and 458 body bags inside the boat; these were recovered by the Italian Navy and brought to a Naval area near Siracusa where a morgue was set up. Here PM examination on all bodies was performed and a biological profile was created through detailed pathological, anthropological odontological and radiological examination of the remains along with sampling for DNA analysis. 3D scans of the face or crania also were performed.

Results. Preservation of the bodies varied from decomposed bodies, partial skeletonization of the extremities to complete skeletonization (with lack of the skull). Over 550 bodies were recovered along with many commingled remains.

Preservation of bodies varied from partial skeletonization of the extremities (41%) to complete skeletonization (23%). All bodies so far belong to males.

Conclusions. The humanitarian disposition of countries, politicians and scientists is a fundamental prerequisite for identifying victims of these disasters. Because of the difference in type of AM data available in such cases, autopsy protocols and identification strategies may need to vary.

Keywords

Dead migrants, identification, biological profile, autopsy protocol.