

Disaster Victim Identification: Relatives' Experiences

This leaflet has been written by members of Disaster Action, survivors and bereaved people from 28 disasters. These include the King's Cross fire, Lockerbie air crash, Hillsborough football stadium crush, Marchioness riverboat sinking, Southall and Ladbroke Grove train crashes, 11 September attacks, South East Asian Tsunami, the 7 July 2005 London bombings, the Sharm El Sheikh and other recent overseas attacks and transportation disasters. Our aim is to give voice to those on the receiving end of disaster.

Many DA members have had experience of the death of close family and friends and their identification through odontology, finger printing, DNA, visual means, jewellery and other associated items. The impact of the often impersonal and invasive processes that lead to an identification can be profound and long-lasting on those left behind. The personal stories here illustrate the depth of that impact and suggest ways in which that impact can be alleviated. The experiences and views expressed here - which at times seem contradictory - show the need for flexibility and the importance of, wherever possible, treating each set of bereaved individually.

This leaflet should be read alongside the DA Guidance for Responders leaflet.

Need for well managed and direct communication with families

'In our case, naming of the victims as well as many other aspects was not managed or controlled. Families would find out very intimate details about their loved ones from the press most of the time.'

Polish Air Force Tu-154, Russia, 2010

'My husband's body was sent back to the UK, along with the other British bodies from the Saudia disaster. I was asked if I wanted to see the body (not to identify him - I presumed someone from the British Embassy did. I never established who), but in light of the fact that he had been burnt to death, I was not too keen on the idea.

Saudia Air Crash, Saudi Arabia, 1980

Need for clear explanation and informed choice and sensitivity

'This subject is of importance to every parent or next of kin in that the coroner should explain your legal rights before a post mortem takes place. Families were not advised as to what is involved with a post mortem or their rights. Everybody is now aware that the body becomes the property of the Coroner; however, not one family was advised that they could attend a post mortem or if they were unhappy with the result of the first post mortem you could ask for a second post mortem.'

Hillsborough Football Stadium Disaster, Liverpool, England, 1989

'It took ten months for my brother to be identified. The samples taken from me and my parents got damaged in the post, and so we went back to New York. The process was then carried out respectfully. The medical examiners were a fine example of good practice, explaining what they were doing, holding meetings, explaining the science. They asked every family member how they wished to be kept informed, ignoring the "next of kin" concept.'

11 September Attacks, New York, 2001

Value in seeing the body

‘If DNA testing had been available to identify the dead in 1987 it is likely that I would have been denied the chance to identify my brother myself, visually, which I did as he lay on a trolley in the corridor of a mortuary. I found that seeing him was psychologically extremely beneficial as it helped me to understand with certainty what had happened to him, and to grasp that he was no longer there. It was also good to have a last moment to spend with him before he was buried.

Moreover, it was important to me that I had been involved and alongside him, as it were, in the last part of my brother’s journey, even after he died. It felt like other people whom he didn’t know were “dealing with him” and just “processing” him otherwise. What might have been helpful was a degree of preparation before I saw him. I felt terrified not knowing at all what kind of state he was going to be in.’

King’s Cross, London Underground Fire, London, England, 1987

Significance of information, timing, sensitivity and respect

‘I was informed that it would be difficult and traumatic for me to identify my husband in the morgue of a Saudi hospital, particularly given the damage done to his body after death by the terrorists, and the chaotic conditions in the hospital. Identification was carried out by the British Ambassador, a friend in whom I had complete trust. I never had any doubts about the identification. I was not able to see my husband’s body until about ten days after his death, once his body had been repatriated to the United Kingdom and after a post mortem had been carried out by a Home Office pathologist. I would have liked to have spent a few moments with him and to see him at peace. But the time lapse and damage, particularly to his face, meant that his body was almost unrecognizable to me and seeing him in this state even for a few seconds has left a lasting and horrifying impression. But I would like to stress that all the advice I received at the time was not only correct but was given to me with consideration, empathy and respect. And being given the choice about whether or not to see Michael was appropriate.’

Al Khobar Terrorist Attack, Saudi Arabia 2004

Need for positive confirmation and correct identification

‘My husband was buried. A few months later, I was told that the parents of one of the British air hostesses had been given some of her jewellery that had been on the body, only it wasn’t that of their daughter; in other words, they had buried the wrong body! I was asked if I wanted to take this further. I refused as I felt I did not want to go down a very painful route.’

Saudia Air Crash

‘These days there is a worrying fear of misidentification. The desire for certainty means that there is now a total reliance on scientific methods of identification, the use of which (and the delays) must surely sometimes fly in the face of common sense and compassion, in circumstances when people can be visually identified.

On the other hand, one person remained unidentified after King’s Cross, but, in 2004, he was exhumed and his identity restored to him through the use of DNA. This was made possible because of the forethought of those who had handled the process.’

King’s Cross, London Underground Fire

‘DNA was not in use for Lockerbie – many were identified by finger prints and dental records even when they were fully recognisable, as in my brother’s case, when he was travelling with his US

Green Card in his pocket (which has a full face photo, social security number and fingerprint on it).

Seventeen people remained unidentified even though there were three intact male bodies and a certain number of missing men. Six weeks after the crash all the unidentified remains were cremated and buried. It would not have occurred to us then that this meant their identifications would never be possible. The loss is all the more acute for the lack of physical certainty, but in any case it takes years for the feeling that one day you might see him at the door, or in the street, to fade away.'

Lockerbie Air Crash, Scotland, 1988

'Body parts of British soldiers who died on operations in Afghanistan have been mixed up and placed in the wrong coffins. The government has admitted that the remains of at least one serviceman, who died in Britain's worst military disaster in the war, ended up inside another victim's coffin.' (Guardian newspaper, 29 April 2007)

'When I had to speak to the pathologist he said the mix up happened when they swabbed a finger with a wedding ring on which had been covered in someone else's blood. They had failed to take a tissue sample. We are both grateful that DNA identification was available and that we got some of "our" son back, but it must be done thoroughly.'

RAF Nimrod Crash, Afghanistan, 2006

'The fact that the investigation is being carried out by a foreign state has meant that mistakes have been made in identifications and exhumations have been necessary. For example president in exile Kaczorowski was mistakenly identified by someone who thought he recognised him from TV appearances. I believe that there was political pressure to have identifications completed as quickly as possible at the sacrifice of carrying out DNA in majority of cases. This led to great distress and the need to exhume victims.'

Polish Air Force Tu-154

'My brother was never identified. Nor was it made clear that a body which might have been his was buried at Père La Chaise cemetery in Paris, at the foot of the UTA memorial, quite a big piece of ground probably some 30 yards by 15.... There was a small chance that he was not buried there though his body was recovered. I think the odds were against that. I was offered a body as his in November 1989 and rejected it on the grounds that the shoe size was too small and the body was wearing heavy metal jewellery, such as I'd never seen my brother wear.'

UT772 Air Crash, Niger, 1989

The difference DNA can make

'When I think of the difference the use of DNA would have made to families in the wake of disasters in the 1980s - there would have been a huge saving in unnecessary pain and suffering. We had to wait five days before our daughter was formally identified because they had to have a minimum number of criteria to agree before they would confirm a death.

Because they refused to release the names of victims until all had been identified (the result of bodies being identified with the wrong name), we had to wait an extra three days for the dentist to come back from holiday to confirm the dental records of another victim.

So, the advent of DNA testing is a significant breakthrough in being able to accurately identify victims swiftly and to put their families out of their misery.

It is still a very emotional subject for me to discuss even after 27 years and I hope that new practices

will help to alleviate the anguish we and others suffered in all those disasters of the 1980s and since.’

Manchester Air Disaster, Manchester, England, 1985

The importance of identification for making sense of loss and grieving

“Ambiguous loss” affects all those waiting for an identification of a loved one, whether for a week, a month, a year or forever. The missing are physically absent but psychologically present. There is incredible stress associated with living with this. Normal rituals are not possible.

The waiting is incredibly difficult because it messes up the natural processes. It is not that our reaction is complicated, but that the death itself is complicated. Accepting this takes the pressure off the families. It is like living with a chronic illness - eventually we find ways of living with it.’

11 September Attacks

Need for compassion and the impact of insensitivity

‘For our first funeral we buried ashes from Ground Zero, which were given to every family by the Mayor. A second funeral was possible years later, but my brother’s remains were posted like a cargo parcel to Europe after seven years of fighting. “Normal” bereavement could then start.’

11 September Attacks

‘Recently pictures of bodies from the crash site have been leaked on the Internet. The pictures were taken by someone officially at the site and cover bodies at the site, bodies in coffins before they were sealed and bodies at the morgue. These pictures identify the persons photographed. Such things should never have been allowed to occur.

Aside from naming individuals we have experienced their voices being played at press conferences. In our case there seems to be little understanding as to the trauma events such as this cause.

I feel sometimes that no public disclosures should be made at all until the investigation is closed and permission from affected families has been obtained. In our case the press is the medium for disseminating all the information.’

Polish Air Force Tu-154

‘This is a painful subject but one of great importance. For us, being asked for DNA samples by our police family liaison officer was an acknowledgment that our concerns about our son’s involvement were real ones and being taken seriously. This was in marked contrast to the initial attitude of the Help Line and the three days we had to endure of remarks like “Oh, he’ll turn up” and questions like “Does he often go off without telling you?”

... Taking DNA samples was handled very sensitively. More problematic for me were other aspects of the identification process – for example, our family dentist was contacted without consulting us and this was very upsetting for staff there who had known my son since he was four years old but had not realised his involvement in 7/7 at that stage. With hindsight, it seems increasingly important to me for the complete implications of “naming the dead” to be explained to the bereaved in as sensitive way as possible and more than once given the state of shock and incomprehension sudden, violent bereavement involves.’

London Bombings, England, 2005

‘There were two different stages, in Thailand it was very confused and then when we went back to England it was very difficult. We got a police family liaison officer who requested personal items – we were unsure about the process. It was very upsetting. To us it felt like it was a crime scene.’

South East Asian Tsunami, 2004

Reminder of Key Principles

- Medical care
- Access to information
- Practical and financial help
- Openness, transparency, sensitivity
- Empowerment
- Informed choices
- Emotional first aid/psychosocial support
- Respect for individual difference/privacy/dignity
- Acknowledgment and recognition