Forensic Odontology

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Letter to Editor

Dr. Joe Verco has forged and is driving a South Australia initiative to individually mark dental implants to assist in disaster victim identification. The idea has been presented to the International College of Dentists President Dick Cook Section VIII Australasia, and on to Dr. Charles Siroky, the International President of ICD. Recently Supt. Bruce James-Martin, Industrial Relations Branch SA Pol, assisted Dr. Verco in galvanising a working group to put forward a collaborative and administratively effective methodology for the laser marking of implants for tracking and identification purposes, with an appropriate alpha-numeric (Table 1). Dentistry provides a great service to the community not only to the living but also to relatives of the deceased. Following the death of a person, identification is required for legal and ethical reasons. Usual comparison methods for identification include visual identification, fingerprint DNA testing and dental comparison. At severe incineration events, fire will damage or destroy physical evidence of victims such as clothing, documents, tattoos, fingerprints, and hair and at high temperatures the DNA, which otherwise would aid the identification process. Dental evidence also could be ashened and fragile leading to a loss of information.

Table 1: Dr. John Berketa's summary of dental implant coding in disaster victim identification.

The group comprised:	
Supt. Bruce James-Martin:	Industrial Relations Branch SA Pol.
Insp. Alex Zimmerman:	Federal Police, Disaster Victim Identification.
Dr. John Berketa:	The University of Adelaide, Forensic Odontology
Dr. Richard Sawers:	International College of Dentistry (Regent Section VIII). Pierre Fauchard Academy (Trustee)
Dr. Joe Verco:	Pierre Fauchard Academy (Editorial Board)
Dr. Samantha Mead:	ADA SA Branch CEO

Therefore, the identification of victims of incineration events can be a daunting and intensive task. Dental implant placement has become a popular and accepted form of treatment for tooth loss. One of the qualities of titanium and its alloys is it has a very high melting point and has proven to withstand cremation. Coupled with this, is that Straumann© company have been placing batch numbers within the chamber of their implants which also can be read following incineration. Although the number of implants with the same batch number may vary from 24 to 2400 this is within the context of worldwide distribution. For identification of a deceased individual cross checking the number to a registry of records would assist in the Coroner. Ideally, if all implant companies had a unique serial number rather than a batch number placed within their chambers and these numbers are recorded onto an Australian wide central registry, this would make the identification of severely incinerated victims with a dental implant a more stream lined process. The Australian Orthopaedic Association set up a registry in 1999 with the help of federal government funding. Initially to keep track of failing orthopaedic implants, it also has a function in assisting victim identification and has proven its worth.

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