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Cover photo by Fadi Kheir

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Dr. Shanon Kirchhoff Aides in Disaster Recovery Efforts
When large-scale disasters with mass casualties occur, dental volunteers from the Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT) arrive quickly and begin taking postmortem dental X-rays for the process of identifying bodies that have been recovered.

Dr. Shanon Kirchhoff, who has had an orthodontic practice in Cape Girardeau, MO for the past 24 years, is a DMORT volunteer. He was a member of the first DMORT team to arrive in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and also served last spring in Joplin, MO after a massive tornado leveled much of the community.

Dr. Kirchhoff’s first experience with dental mortuary work, however, was during his time in the Army in the early 1970s.

“A dentist asked for a volunteer from our unit to assist him with X-rays to help identify a burn victim,” he says. “I knew it would be very difficult emotionally, but I was also intrigued by how the work would be done. It seemed like an interesting opportunity, so I offered to help.”

Nearly 20 years later, as a recent orthodontic graduate in Cape Girardeau, Dr. Kirchhoff learned that some states had dental volunteer teams designed to assist with identifying victims of disasters. Missouri had no such organization, and Dr. Kirchhoff joined in an effort to form one.

“I went to Nebraska to learn how the team there functioned,” says Dr. Kirchhoff. “A group of us then established the Missouri Emergency Response Identification Team (MERIT) in 1994.”

MERIT is administered by the Missouri Dental Association and Dr. Kirchhoff is the current co-chair of the organization.

“MERIT is also designed to aide with individual body identifications when there is a need,” says Dr. Kirchhoff. “I am available for that purpose in Cape Girardeau, but we have had little need for the service here.”

After the September 11 terrorist attack in 2001, Dr. Kirchhoff wanted to help with the recovery work in New York City.

“I quickly learned that my MERIT credential would not enable me to volunteer,” he says. “Only volunteers affiliated with the federal response team could go.”

Dr. Shanon Kirchhoff is pictured outside his office in Cape Girardeau, MO. When a disaster strikes and there are many casualties, he must be prepared to pack and leave immediately.
Dr. Kirchhoff then began a lengthy process of joining the federal DMORT team. He had been accepted into DMORT by the time Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in August 2005. Nearly 2,000 people died in the hurricane and the flooding that followed. Water filled about 80 percent of the city, many neighboring parishes and all Mississippi beach towns.

“Usually in a disaster situation the DMORT team has access to a hotel where you can spend the few hours that you are not working,” he says. “In New Orleans, there were no hotels open. We stayed in a school, sleeping on cots. There was no running water, although after a couple of days we had access to a ‘birdbath’ truck where we could shower.”

The volunteers worked in a warehouse that had electricity from a generator. Each stage of the identification process had its own area, including fingerprinting and collection of personal effects accompanying each victim. DNA testing is utilized for some victims. The morgue operated 24 hours a day and each volunteer worked one 12-hour shift per day. The X-ray and dental photography team included dentists, dental hygienists and dental assistants.

“Most Katrina victims drowned, with many of the bodies in such devastating condition that it was very traumatic for the team members,’’ says Dr. Kirchhoff. “Still, we did our jobs and were able to work as efficiently as possible under the circumstances. We identified more bodies in less time than ever in the history of DMORT.”

An affiliated team of volunteers contacted the dentists of people who had been reported missing, in an effort to collect their antemortem X-rays. After a body was identified, volunteers at a Family Assistance Center took the information and spoke with the deceased’s family.

“As you might imagine, collecting antemortem X-rays was often difficult,” says Dr. Kirchhoff. “Many of the victims were poor and had little or no dental care. In other cases, local dentists were difficult to reach because of the flooding situation.”

DMORT volunteers experienced similar challenges in Joplin, MO last spring, where the tornado destroyed not only many homes but also offices – including dental offices.
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Digital X-rays Helped Make Joplin Identifications Easier

“Many victims in Joplin had dental records, and the fact that some dentists have their X-rays digitized is very helpful, since those X-rays could usually be accessed,” says Dr. Kirchoff. “But digitized films were not always available.”

When the tornado struck Joplin, a city of 50,000, in May 2011, more than 160 people were killed. Dr. Kirchhoff explains that a DMORT volunteer must be prepared to quickly pack and leave when disasters strike, leaving his or her staff to re-schedule patients.

“The tornado hit Joplin on a Sunday, and I left to drive there the following day,” he says. Working for four days after the tornado, the DMORT team on which Dr. Kirchhoff served was able to identify about 150 bodies.

Dr. Kirchhoff notes that the process of matching postmortem with antemortem X-rays has traditionally been difficult and time-consuming for those attempting to confirm matches.

“During the mid-1990s, the process was revolutionized by the introduction of the WinID, a computerized dental identification system,” he says. “The system was developed by a dentist, Dr. James McGivney. For the past few years, the system has been able to interface with digital radiographs. It can pick up many unique characteristics of teeth and the skeletal structure of the jaw. Depending on how the individual died, there may be damage to the jaw, or some teeth may be missing, but even with an incomplete postmortem record the WinID can still work effectively.”

For Dr. Kirchhoff and his DMORT and MERIT colleagues, the rewards of their work come from providing what closure they can to the families of the victims.

“The circumstances of our work are very grim, but we do know that in many cases victims of disasters do not suffer for long before they die,” he says. “We hope that brings some comfort to the families. Everyone who does this kind of work has to find his or her best way of dealing with it. There is some comfort in seeing the dignity and respect with which the bodies are treated in the morgues. No matter who they were, they are cared for as if they were family members of the volunteers.”

About DMORT

Learn more by visiting the DMORT Web site, DMORT.org/index.html. For information about state-level dental mortuary volunteer teams, contact your state dental organization.