JOHN/JANE DOE CENTER

The identification of a decedent is one of the most critical functions of the Medical Examiner's Office and must be made by official and verifiable means. The misidentification of an individual is not an option and, conversely, if a person is not identified, we know nothing of their medical or psychiatric history or how they came to be in the situation in which they were found. The majority of decedents are identified by family members or through government identification (such as a driver's license). However, when a decedent carries no identification, no family is present to make identification, or the condition of the body is such that a visual identification is not possible, he or she becomes a Doe and the identification process begins.

Most decedents become identified quickly, often within a day or two, through fingerprints or tattoos. Some decedents are identified by a family member who views a photograph and then provides supporting identifying documentation. Scientific identification can be made by a dental comparison using our forensic odontologist, through radiographic comparison, or through surgical history and identifying anatomic features. When identification cannot be made by these means, DNA profile comparison is attempted. Very rarely, we will use a circumstantial identification based on physical characteristics, morphology, and known activities and location at the time of death.

When necessary, we make every effort to obtain an artist's sketch, through the assistance of a Medical Examiner's Office volunteer. We release the sketch, any identifiable information and the decedent's physical characteristics to all of San Diego's media outlets in hopes of learning an identity or contacting possible family.

When a decedent remains unidentified and we have no leads for a possible identity, several legal mandates go into effect. Those legal mandates include an entry of the decedent's information, known physical characteristics and full forensic dental examination into NCIC (National Crime Information Center) in order to perform a comparison of the decedent against reported missing persons. Often a full anthropology examination is conducted to provide information such as race/ethnicity, age, height, and skeletal anomalies. We also provide a DNA sample to the California Department of Justice (DOJ) DNA Laboratory, so that the decedent's genetic profile can be entered into CODIS (Combined DNA Index System) for a possible match against someone missing or wanted, whose profile is already in CODIS.

In 2010, 130 of our 2718 cases (4.7% percent) came to the Medical Examiner's Office as a John or Jane Doe. As of 06/02/2011, we have identified 121 of the 130, an identification rate of 93.1%.