

Disaster Victim Identification

Identification process and the coroner's role

What is Disaster Victim Identification?

Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) is the process of recovering and identifying the deceased in circumstances where there is a risk of misidentification either due to the state of the deceased's body or the number of deceased people. Where a Mass Fatality Incident (MFI) is declared by the Chief Coroner the DVI process is followed but DVI is not limited to just those situations.

Recovering and identifying the deceased can be a lengthy and complex task. The time taken to complete the DVI process is impacted by the number of deceased and the nature and location of the death(s).

Correctly identifying all deceased is an act of respect to the deceased and can be incredibly important for grieving whānau and friends. Correct identification can also be required for legal reasons, such as criminal proceedings and the administration of estates.

Visual identification alone is often inadequate to correctly identify deceased in those circumstances and can result in the deceased being misidentified.

There are numerous examples of visual identification resulting in deceased being misidentified. Following the Bali Bombing of 2002, 9 of the 18 victims were incorrectly identified using visual identification techniques alone. Misidentifying bodies of the deceased can add to grief and trauma of surviving whānau and friends.

New Zealand's DVI process

New Zealand follows INTERPOL's DVI process. This is a four-step process, which uses both post-mortem and ante-mortem data to help identify the deceased.

Step 1: The scene phase

The deceased and their property are located and removed from the scene to a mortuary.

Scenes can be chaotic and dangerous. It may not be safe for anyone to enter the scene for some time, or at all. Locating and removing the deceased can take a significant amount of time, particularly if safety risks are identified.

Step 2: The post-mortem phase

The coroner may direct a post-mortem examination of the deceased. During this examination, forensic evidence, including fingerprints, DNA and photographs of tattoos and scars, may be collected to help identify the deceased.

Step 3: The ante-mortem phase

Police may interview whānau and friends of the deceased to gather personal information such as hair colour, eye colour, descriptions of clothing and personal belongings, and distinguishing features such as tattoos and scars.

Police may also collect dental and medical records, fingerprints, DNA and personal belongings from the deceased's home or whānau.

Step 4: The reconciliation phase

Police compare and reconcile post-mortem and ante-mortem information to identify the deceased.

This information is presented to the coroner, who if satisfied with the information, will make the final determination as to the identity of the deceased.

The coroner may then release the body of the deceased to their whānau.

The coroner's role

Coroners are independent judicial officers who investigate unexpected, violent, or suspicious deaths to determine the cause and circumstances of death and, where appropriate, make recommendations designed to prevent deaths from occurring in similar circumstances.

The Duty Coroner play a key role in the initial aftermath of all deaths without known cause or in circumstances of trauma. They are supported by staff of the Ministry of Justice.

The Duty Coroner's initial responsibilities include:

- Working with police, pathologists, forensic odontologists and other relevant parties to determine the strategy for recovering and identifying the deceased,
- maintaining legal custody and control of the deceased once the death has been reported,
- deciding whether to direct a post-mortem examination of the deceased, and if so, the scope of the examination.
- ensuring the identity of the deceased has been satisfactorily established and making the final determination as to the identity of the deceased,
- deciding when a body can be released to the whānau.

The Ministry of Justice staff supporting the Duty Coroner work in the National Initial Investigation Office (NIIO). NIIO operates 24/7 (including statutory holidays) to support the Duty Coroner to make judicial decisions in the early stages after a death is reported.

Q&A

When can it take a relatively long time to identify a body?

- Descriptions have changed, such as the deceased changed clothing.
- The deceased was seriously injured.

- Results from samples and/or records have to be arranged from overseas.

Why isn't it enough for a friend or relative to identify a deceased?

- International experience shows visual identification is not conclusive. Those trying to make an identification are highly stressed and mistakes occur.
- Severe injuries can make visual identification difficult.

How long does the DVI process take?

- It depends on factors including number of people available to work on it. DNA samples usually take several days to process.
- Police are retrieving information (Phase 3) from people reported missing while searches continue.

How are families kept informed?

A Police family liaison officer is assigned to families of people reported missing. They provide a consistent point of contact, inform families about the process and update them with progress.