Presentation by Dr. Sauer: Forensic Anthropology at MSU 2010.

Question: What questions in Physical Anthropology do you find the most provocative?

A) Concept of Race. Dealt with it the most in his career. What does it mean to validate a technique? “That’s the cool thing about anthropology, there’s just so much to think about.” Has to do with time, variation, and bicultural approach. And more. One of the most important contributions anthropology makes is teaching. Teaching the approach, teaching a way to look at the world.

Question: What is forensic anthropology?

A) “We identify.”

Question: What about forensic anthropology makes it anthropology? Why not medical doctors?

A) Holistic approach. Anthropology is the study of humankind in all contexts.

Forensic Anthropology at MSU -- Case Study and Research

Person lived in a house with other people. The person disappeared. Explained as “They went to live with a relative in Chicago.” After a time, called to see if person got there. Relative said no. Police were called in. House that person and friends had been living in was condemned. Brought in cadaver dogs, gravitated to one room. Pile of cement on top of an old bed. Crime lab began to chip away at the cement. Inside of cement was a body. Someone had put the body in a bed and covered it in cement. Body had been there awhile, was mostly skeleton. Why would they do such a thing? At the morgue, blanket had been wrapped around the person. Pulled out skeleton.

Biological profile: Age, sex, ancestry, medical history, and height. Want to match a missing person’s file. Want to try and find and narrow down the profile to make it easier to search for in dental records and other sources.

Probable African American, early to mid teens. Gender? Male. 3rh molar comes in around age eighteen but may come in earlier. A lot of tooth ware, shows grinding of the teeth. Why so much?

Victim was 24 years old at age of death. Why? Abuse, neglect, and malnutrition. Could effect development, may cause the teeth to be so worn. Diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy. Found out that Cerebral Palsy is a complicated disease that…

The man was 24, authorities believe he died. His mother didn’t tell anyone he died. His mother was getting checks every month and cashing them. Wanted to keep them coming. The ware on teeth was caused by muscle dentonia. Very poor dental care. Teeth had severe build up of tarter. Bone growth is unexpected. Dismaturation: abnormal bones. Cerebral Palsy: incidence in US 2.0/1,000 live births. Lack of control over motor activity
Complicated etiology because there are numerous poorly understood causes. 100,000s in US

Was the abnormalities caused by malnourishment or disease?

2008 case: The aunt of the child with Cerebral Palsy that died. Rented a storage space and put the child in there.

Research questions: The evaluation of Cerebral Palsy on dental eruption and tooth formation. Went to doctors who had dealt with a large sample of people with Cerebral Palsy and get the X-rays.

The individual from the first case was never positively identified.

Case Initiated Research:
Child abuse/ timing of injuries
Cranial trauma
Precise aging: Different development by ancestry. Need to find a more precise way.

Question: Do you think if they didn’t cement the skeleton, there would have been a conviction of the parents? Ie, if it had been in the woods, would it have been able to be linked back to the parents?

A) The dentition would have tipped them off that the individual was older. But, wouldn’t have linked it to Cerebral Palsy. Don’t know.

Question: How do you cope with the idea that you’re looking at the skeleton of a person?

A) “How do you deal with unpleasant cases? It bothers me. When you gotta do a job you don’t want to do, you become a professional and just do it. Went to New York day after 9/11. How do you deal with all that death? Put on your big boy pants and do it. Real hard time doing it. Tend not to show pictures that will elicit an emotional response unless I’m trying to make a point.” Need to respect the humanness of the situation. “A lot of jobs put you in stressful situations.”

Question: Why do you do Forensic Anthropology?

A) Deeper answer: “It’s exciting. I like to solve cases. I like to testify. I came in to anthropology after undergraduate school and I really believe in what anthropology does. What troubled me was what it does, how does it serve humanity? We do anthropology to learn more about the world. But, for me, that I could take the skills of anthropology and solve a case in a few days is the main reason I like anthropology.” Conceptual ideas also interest him. “Besides that, it’s exciting.”