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CONTACT: Lori Waggoner
Office: 214/688-3404
Home: 214/245-6611

**** Medical photographers
create disaster plan

Medical examiners know that certain professionals will be needed when they develop a plan for identifying victims of a disaster.

Dr. Charles Petty, Dallas County Medical Examiner and director of the Southwestern Institute of Forensic Sciences, had made plans for calling in FBI agents, dentists and x-ray technicians in case of major emergencies. But when Delta Flight 191 crashed on Aug. 2, Dr. Petty said there is one vital area he had not thought about before -- photography.

Forensic photography is the first step in the long process of identifying bodies that often are not easily identifiable. Before medical examination can be made, the bodies' conditions and personal effects must be documented.

Jim Bille, the only forensic photographer at the institute, worked alone into the early morning hours as refrigerated trucks brought in the remains of the crash victims. In a small, stuffy room heated to 90 degrees by the glare of photoflood lights, Bille put on rubber gloves to open each body bag and arrange its contents for photographing -- making sure that its assigned case number was plainly visible. Climbing to the top of a six-foot ladder, he leaned out and over each bag, taking about five different shots of each one.

After almost seven hours of this grueling work, he realized he needed help. Outside the room, family members grimly waited for identification of their loved ones. The efficiency of the identification process depended on his photography.

But whom do you call at 2 a.m.? Bille says it takes someone with a medical background to do such work -- a medical photographer.

Gale Spring, director of photography for the pathology department at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas, arrived around 2 a.m. to help relieve Bille. Together they worked around the clock, without sleep and without relief.

All of the bodies were positively identified in six days, which is "quite a record," according to Petty.

Through the course of their work they realized that if this accident had involved two planes, their workload would have been impossible. "There could have been a bottleneck," Bille says. "They (the pathologists) couldn't do anything until we'd done our jobs."

Spring suggested they ought to have a group of photographers on call for such emergencies. "If we are going to represent ourselves as professionals, then we need a plan to bring (professional medical photographers) together in case of disaster," he says. "We need to be prepared."

Spring, who is vice chairman of the Texas Chapter of the

Biological Photographic Association, says that to his knowledge there is no disaster plan for medical photographers anywhere in the United States.

Bille and Spring already have taken the first steps toward organizing such a group. They have called together medical photographers from area medical institutions and local sheriffs' and police departments to form the nucleus of their organization.

At the organizational meeting, Bille and Spring took 15 photographers on a tour of the forensic science institute so they could see where they would be working and showed the group photographs that were taken both at the crash site and at the institute.

"We want you to get a feel for what you will be doing, should you volunteer to help us out," Spring told the group.

Not everybody is cut out for this type of work. One photographer came down to help and had to leave after two hours because "he couldn't take it anymore," says Bille.

Spring quickly added that forensic photography is not the only assistance needed. Photographers also were needed to process the rolls of film, both black and white and color, that stacked up and to print pictures from the negatives. More than 700 color photos and 400 black and white photos were taken during the weekend of the Delta crash.

"Rolls and rolls of film were piling up," Spring says, "and we didn't even know for sure if any of them would turn out. It's amazing how few errors actually came up."

Bille and Spring are willing to provide training for interested medical photographers. They are making plans to allow potential volunteers to attend autopsies and shoot photographs so they can find out beforehand if they can handle this type of work.

Petty, who spoke at the organizational meeting, said, "I think it's an excellent idea -- one that will pay dividends should we ever be forced to go through something like this again."

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