

# Grim job worlds away *from TV drama*

By Melissa Marino, *The Age*  
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*Dr James Robertson*  
*National Manager*  
*Forensic and Technical Services*

*At first glance the Interpol guide for Disaster Victim Identification, neatly subheaded in 56 pages of sections and subsections, looks like any other impersonal bureaucratic document.*

*But among the formal format there are the clues; the language betrays that there is more to this than just a dry set of rules.*

"The first function will be to locate and mark all bodies and body parts," it says. There are humans involved here. Victims. People who have been killed in sudden and often violent circumstances. They have to be identified. Their names found. Their families told.

This guide is the document used internationally that helps keep things in order when chaos abounds. And in the wake of the Boxing Day tsunami, James Robertson is in charge of administering it.

As the forensic national manager for the Australian Federal Police the buck stops with him. He had swung into action within days of the tsunami, charged with overseeing the effort overseas and at home to find and identify missing people.

Dr Robertson returned to Australia after a week seeing first-hand the mammoth effort to identify the thousands of victims.

In Khao Lak an Australasian team, at the request of Thai authorities, is running one of two identification sites where the bodies are being carefully worked through, to find out who they are.

The Interpol guidelines designed in part by Australian authorities and “really developed for a situation like a jumbo jet coming down,” are largely in place, says Dr Robertson, although have required some tweaking for the unprecedented circumstances.

Usually, no bodies are supposed to be returned until all the identification process is completed – “terrific” says Dr Robertson when you’ve got a small number of bodies. “But when you have a situation with thousands of people deceased and a process that might take who knows how long, you can imagine the public reaction if no bodies were released for six or 12 months.”

What is crucial, he says, is that bodies are identified in at least one of three key ways. Fingerprints, dental records or DNA. There is a lot of pressure to release bodies on visual identification, on tattoos or jewellery, but the teams working in the temporary mortuaries in Thailand know how dangerous this can be. They don’t want a case of mistaken identity.

So as the pathologists in Thailand gather the evidence from the bodies and teams in victims’ home countries are collecting samples of antemortem material.

In Australia it’s a national effort combining state-based Missing Persons Units, the Australian Federal Police and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade who have constant contact with families who provide the evidence, perhaps from something as innocuous as a toothbrush that may prove a deadly match.

Data is then sent electronically and by post to be matched with samples taken from the bodies at an Information Management Centre in Phuket, specially established with the help of the Australians.

It’s Dr Robertson’s job to make sure it all runs smoothly and it’s a process that he says could take months and conceivably the whole year.

Still, some victims, if they haven’t been reported missing, may never be identified and some of those reported missing may never be found.

Dr Robertson, who has worked mostly from Australia since the tsunami, went to Thailand to offer support, “sort out some of the politics,” and to keep the efforts of more than 400 people from over 30 countries “on the same song sheet.”

But he is keen to point out it is the people on the ground — the pathologists, dentists, police, scientists, psychologists and family liaison officers — doing the real job.

In Khao Lak he saw them as they set off at the crack of dawn, travelled hours to the site and worked on the mortuary line for hours, collecting clothes and jewellery and gathering samples from around 100 bodies a day. Others prepare bodies for the mortuary line, transfer them into proper body bags and return them to storage until they are repatriated.

It’s draining work, but Dr Robertson says the key is to keep the tasks separate, and to keep it impersonal for those on the mortuary line. In Khao Lak “where the real world differs dramatically from CSI”, the people examining the bodies won’t be consoling the victims’ families.

“That’s actually the worst thing you can do,” he says. “If you can visualise the person as a person ... it becomes much more difficult to deal with that person when you’re seeing the body.”

Dr Robertson says an appropriate degree of separation allows the specialists to remain objective, “knowing that what you’re collecting ultimately is going to be what returns that body to whoever’s family it should be returned to.”

Impersonal and objective; just like the guide.