

Disaster victim identification - Guidance overview

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First published 23 October 2013

An emergency or major incident may result in fatalities. Disaster victim identification (DVI) is the internationally accepted term for the processes and procedures for recovering and identifying deceased people and human remains in multiple fatality incidents. The process involves bringing together antemortem and postmortem information to make a positive identification by scientific means in a dignified manner, taking into account the needs of the investigation process, the needs of the bereaved and the needs of the community. Many organisations including National Policing Chiefs Council and the College of Policing have committed to the principles of the [Charter for Families Bereaved through Public Tragedy](#).

See [Jones, J. KBE \(2017\) 'The patronising disposition of unaccountable power' A report to ensure the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is not repeated. London: TSO.](#)

DVI takes place concurrently with investigations into the cause of an incident and into any criminal culpability arising from it. DVI principles are subject to international agreement through [INTERPOL](#), which maintains a command centre and a crisis management support group. In the event of a mass fatality incident in a member country [INTERPOL](#) can assist with the coordination of the international response.

Terrorism is identified as a tier one risk to UK national security. The government sets the UK security aims and priorities, based on an understanding of the risks the country currently faces or may face in the future. The [CONTEST](#) strategy outlines how the threats from terrorism to the UK will be managed across departments and with a wide range of partners.

Reliable identification of the deceased forms a key part of any investigation into the circumstances of death. Investigations may lead to findings such as accidental death, suicide, misadventure, negligence or murder or manslaughter in the case of criminal investigations, including terrorism. The investigation to identify human remains should complement and not unreasonably hinder any criminal investigation.

This authorised professional practice (APP) on DVI must be used with consideration to the wider investigative requirements, according to the specific incident or incidents that are being investigated. Close cooperation with the Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) or Counter Terrorism Senior Investigating Officer (CT SIO) is important in a successful Disaster Victim Identification operation.

The current DVI processes have developed through the lessons learned following major incidents which resulted in significant loss of life, in particular the findings from the public inquiry into the collision on the River Thames between the pleasure boat the 'Marchioness' and the dredger 'Bowbelle' chaired by Lord Justice Clarke.

Charles Haddon-Cave QC represented the Marchioness Action Group, which was formed by the families and friends of the deceased. In his oral evidence to the inquiry he said:

The care with which our dead are treated is a mark of how civilised a society we are. Much goes on for understandable reasons behind closed doors. For this reason, there is a special responsibility placed on those entrusted with this work and the authorities who supervise it to ensure that the bodies of the dead are treated with the utmost care and respect. This is what bereaved and loved ones are entitled to expect and what society at large demands.

CLARKE, A. (2001) Public Inquiry into the Identification of Victims Following Major Transport Accidents: Report of Lord Justice Clarke, volume 1, CM 5012, London: TSO, p 9.

The following principles outlined by Lord Justice Clarke in his report in 2001 form the bedrock of DVI processes:

- provision of honest and, as far as possible, accurate information at all times and at every stage
- respect for the deceased and the bereaved
- a sympathetic and caring approach throughout
- the avoidance of mistaken identification

The report reaffirmed that the statutory responsibility for identifying the deceased lies with the coroner. The role of the police service is to assist the coroner in fulfilling this responsibility. The four principles should be adhered to by all police officers and staff, and apply whatever the number of

fatalities arising from a mass fatalities incident.

This APP can be used as a reference by all agencies responsible for dealing with the aftermath of any mass fatality incident.

Tags

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