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Forensic Odontology

Overview

Forensic odontologists are highly experienced, specially trained dentists who use their expertise to help identify unknown remains and trace bite marks to a specific individual.

Forensic odontologists or forensic dentists are typically called in to:

- Identify human remains that cannot be identified using fingerprints or other means
- Identify bodies in mass fatalities, such as plane crashes and natural disasters
- Determine the source of bite mark injuries, in cases of assault or suspected abuse
- Estimate the age of skeletal remains
- Testify in cases of dental malpractice

The forensic odontologist may be called in by police officers, the medical examiner or the coroner.

In death cases, the forensic odontologist attends the autopsy and takes photographs, cranial measurements, dental impressions and xrays from the remains. These exemplars are then compared to those of known missing individuals. If a match can be made, the remains can be identified.

In cases where bite marks are found on the body of a victim or suspected perpetrator, or on food, chewing gum or another item, the forensic odontologist uses the same procedure to determine the source of the bite marks.

The forensic odontologist then writes a detailed report explaining what was done and what conclusions can be made. The forensic odontologist must be prepared to explain the process and justify the findings in court.

This career profile was reviewed and approved by Max Houck, M.A., Director, [Forensic Science Initiative, West Virginia University](http://fsi.research.wvu.edu/) (<http://fsi.research.wvu.edu/>).

Working Conditions

Forensic odontologists usually work as regular dentists much of the time, performing forensic examinations as needed at the request of local law enforcement or the medical examiner.

In death cases, the forensic odontologist may go to the crime or disaster scene. Otherwise, the measurements and xrays are taken as part of the autopsy.

Since crimes and disasters can happen at any time, a forensic odontologist “on call” must be ready to work long hours, day or night, on holidays and on weekends.

The work is highly detailed, demands extremely fine motor skills and requires extraordinary precision and accuracy. Complex equipment, including computers, microscopes and other technologies, may be used in the identification process.

Forensic odontology requires attention to detail and the ability to work patiently to complete a lengthy process step-by-step without rushing.

Accurate and complete records must be kept, and the forensic odontologist must be able to make conclusions based solely on the physical evidence available.

Such close involvement with the investigation of crimes and mass disasters can be emotionally disturbing.

Academic Requirements

A forensic odontologist must first earn a Doctor of Dental Science (DDS) degree to become a dentist. Then extensive additional training is obtained in the techniques and methods of forensic odontology, along with hands-on experience, often by shadowing a more senior professional.

To become board certified by the [American Association of Forensic Science \(www.aafs.org\)](http://www.aafs.org), the forensic odontologist must work 25 cases, accumulate 350 qualification points by attending meetings and other professional development programs, and pass a qualifying exam.

Professional Associations

[American Society of Forensic Odontology \(http://www.newasfo.com/\)](http://www.newasfo.com/)

[American Academy of Forensic Science \(www.aafs.org\)](http://www.aafs.org)

[American Board of Forensic Odontology \(http://www.abfo.org/\)](http://www.abfo.org/)

Funding Opportunities

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[Forensic Science \(http://www.explorehealthcareers.com/en/Field.22.aspx\)](http://www.explorehealthcareers.com/en/Field.22.aspx)

Salary: \$150,000 - \$185,000

Years in school: 4 - 8 *

Job outlook: Excellent

* after high school graduation

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