

Frequently asked questions.

Q Can I view the body?

- A. In some cases the Coroner may allow this to occur. However in most disaster or mass fatality situations viewing the deceased is not recommended.

Q Can I visit the scene?

- A. We understand families wanting to visit scenes as part of the grieving process and where possible Police will facilitate this for families under controlled situations. This is done so that the scene is preserved for DVI work to continue, your safety is ensured and we can afford you appropriate time to respect your loved ones.

Q Where do I go for help?

- A. Depending on the incident a contact officer or family liaison officer may be appointed to assist you with questions. They should be able to advise you regarding counselling or other support services available, delays in the Disaster Victim Identification process or opportunities for briefings from spokespeople involved. DVI officers may not be able to meet with family during the DVI process as their primary role is to facilitate the overall identification process.

Your Contact Officer is:

This brochure has been produced and endorsed by the Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency Disaster Victim Identification Committee (ADVIC). It is to serve as a guide to families of victims as to what the process is when identifying victims of disasters and other mass fatality incidents. There may be some minor differences between jurisdictions. For more detailed information about DVI processes please refer to the Interpol website at:

www.interpol.int/Public/DisasterVictim/Default.asp



The Disaster Victim Identification Process

An explanation for the families of victims



Explaining the Disaster Victim Identification Process

Identification of the deceased after a mass fatality event is not a quick and easy process. It is meticulous with set guidelines based on INTERPOL Standards and with legal standards that must be adhered to on behalf of the Coroner. The aim of the process is to correctly identify the deceased victims of a disaster or incident where there are multiple fatalities or where the identity of deceased victims is in dispute before returning them to their respective families. There are four steps in this process.

1. The Scene Phase

Depending on the incident it may take days or even weeks to fully recover the deceased from a mass fatality site. DVI Officers must ensure that everyone is accounted for and each deceased victim is afforded the appropriate respect and attention.

Scenes of disasters or incidents can be chaotic, dangerous and depending on the incident unsafe for DVI officers to enter for several days after the occurrence. Every effort is made to ensure the safety of our personnel by assessing site safety risks prior to entering the site and on an ongoing basis. Delays may occur if any new risks are identified.

2. Post-mortem Phase

Once deceased victims have been removed from the incident scene, a post mortem examination may be conducted on the deceased victims. This is a process where all human remains are examined by specialists to establish cause of death (if appropriate) and detect forensic evidence that may lead to establishing the identity of the deceased. Such evidence may include; dental examinations, finger prints, DNA profiling, visual indications such as tattoos or scars and x-rays.

In line with INTERPOL protocol visual identification alone is not considered appropriate as a form of identification. Scientific testing must be carried out ensuring that each deceased victim is identified prior to being released to their families.

3. Ante-mortem Phase

This is where you as the family of the victims can provide us with the most assistance. A specialist officer will be assigned to interview family members of the deceased victim and complete an ante-mortem report often referred to as a 'yellow form'. This process can be lengthy as the interviewer will ask a series of pre-determined questions to assist us with the identification of deceased victims. It will include questions about the description of the missing person, jewellery, clothing and other personal items they may have had with them. The interviewer may also want to collect items used by the missing person that may produce scientific evidence (e.g. DNA profiles) to assist in identification. They may also ask family members to submit DNA samples so that a familial relationship can be established. Details of the missing persons medical and dental information including the names and locations of dentists and doctors would also be helpful.

4. Reconciliation Phase

Once the post-mortem and ante-mortem details have been collected, a team of specialists will meet and commence to reconcile both sets of information to determine the identification of the deceased victims. If they are satisfied that they have identified a person. This will then be presented by an Identification Board to the Coroner who will make the final determination as to the identity of the deceased.

Once a victim has been identified it is then the decision of the Coroner as to when the deceased can be released to the family. All efforts will be made to have this done as soon as possible. However in some instances a coroner may hold the victims until they are sure that all victims remains have been appropriately identified.

5. Cultural and Religious Considerations

Mass fatality events are usually very emotional and distressing times for families of deceased victims. As outlined above, the process required to manage the scene and provide identification as efficiently as possible is often very challenging for the investigators. Certain investigational procedures must be followed. However, wherever possible investigators will endeavour to respect the cultural and religious practices of victims during the investigation.