

noticeable exception was the hospital at Matara (see box). By this time decomposition of the corpses meant that identification of facial features was almost impossible (Image 9). Nevertheless, some victims were identified by their clothes or personal affects. The quality of the photographs was very variable, especially where commercial photographers were employed.

Image 9. Victim identification photographs taken two days after the tsunami, Sri Lanka December 28th 2004



Image provided by Dr Perera, Galle Hospital

Management of the dead in Matara General Hospital

The management of the dead in Matara General Hospital has been highlighted as an example of good practice. Within 24 hours, the hospital treated between 1200-1300 patients and received 470 dead bodies. After 72 hours, 547 bodies of Sri Lankans and 15 foreigners had been received by the hospital. The Hospital director, Dr Padmatilaka, who is also a trained forensic pathologist, instructed a nurse to be responsible for processing the dead bodies using a simple protocol:

- Each body was given a unique number
- Digital photographs of each body were taken on arrival
- Other relevant features of the victim were noted
- Personal belongings were removed and packaged separately and given the same number as the body

At the end of the first day 270 victims had been identified by relatives. Photographs of the remaining bodies were displayed in a slide show on a computer set up in the outpatients department. A further 211 victims were identified from the photographs. The remaining 66 unidentified bodies were buried after 72 hours in a mass grave in Matara cemetery by order of the local magistrate. Subsequently, about half of those buried have also been identified from the photographs and personal belongings.

SRI LANKAN				FOREIGN			
547				15			
Adult		Children		Adult		Children	
453		94		11		4	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
157	296	39	55	7	4	1	3

Key learning points

- A single person was responsible for processing the dead
- A simple standard protocol for processing was developed and followed systematically for each victim
- Bodies were numbered and basic identifiable features recorded
- The photographs were taken within 24 hours, before decomposition had disfigured the victims' faces