



Handling Human Remains from Burial Sites and Cemeteries Fact Sheet

Background

Many of Alaska communities are situated along the coastline or along winding braided rivers, to support subsistence lifestyles. Pounding Arctic storms, continuously changing riverbeds, melting permafrost, and earthquakes endanger traditional burial grounds and more modern cemeteries located in these communities. Each year there are one or two reports that caskets and human remains have become exposed due to erosion or other forces of nature. In addition, human-made construction and building also encroach on crypts, burial grounds and cemeteries, requiring human remains to be moved to new locations.

Potential health risks

Individuals who are involved in handling human remains may have concerns about their risk for acquiring infectious diseases from the bodies they are moving. The diseases that most often cause concern are tuberculosis, influenza, and smallpox. Each of these diseases caused serious epidemics and many deaths at various points in Alaska's history.

Desiccated remains are considered very low risk, but remains with soft tissue pose a higher level of concern. Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and other studies have identified organisms in Egyptian mummies and other historical remains; however, these organisms have not been found to be viable/infectious. Furthermore, viable influenza virus from unearthened body tissues of people who died from the Spanish flu in 1918 has never been recovered in culture, even from tissues that have remained frozen.

Recommendations

Persons involved in excavating, storing and handling human remains from burial grounds and cemeteries, should consider precautions in the following circumstances:

- Bodies recovered from sealed coffins
- Bodies that are constantly frozen or in very cold environments, or
- Individuals who are known to have died from smallpox, anthrax, or tetanus.

Recommended precautions for persons working with human remains:

- 1) Use barrier precautions
 - a. Wear latex or vinyl gloves to protect your hands when handling human remains or caskets;
 - b. Protective eyewear;
 - c. Covering for regular clothing that is disposable or can be washed with bleach.
- 2) Use disposable dust masks in enclosed environments or where there may be a lot of dust in the air in an outdoor setting.
- 3) Wash hands immediately after gloves are removed. If running water and soap aren't available, use a waterless hand wash product with 70% alcohol.
- 4) Avoid eating and drinking or smoking at the work area.
- 5) Cover all open skin lesions.
- 6) Place any human remains found outside of caskets or from damaged and opened caskets in body bags.

For more information about laws and protocols pertaining to the discovery of human remains in Alaska, see <http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/oha/humanremainshandout.pdf>

June 18, 2013