

What we've learned from the Boxing Day tsunami

December 19 2014, by David Ellis

Much has been learned from the devastating experience of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, and it's had lasting benefits for disaster management plans in Australia, according to forensic staff from the University of Adelaide.

The disaster on 26 December 2004 resulted in an estimated 230,000 deaths and affected parts of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, the Maldives and other countries. Speaking in the lead up to next week's 10th anniversary of the tsunami, staff at the University of Adelaide who played key roles in the aftermath have recalled their experiences and the lessons learned.

Among the University of Adelaide staff who attended the [disaster zone](#) in Phuket, Thailand to help identify victims of the tsunami were Dr Helen James, Director of Forensic Odontology at the University, and [forensic pathologist](#) Dr Calle Winskog, who was with the Swedish contingent at the time and is now an Associate Professor with the University's School of Medical Sciences.

"Although we were all professional in our work, it was overwhelming at times – we were engulfed by it," says Associate Professor Winskog, who spent two separate one-month tours in Thailand helping to identify victims. "At our site alone we had 2500 bodies to identify. There were many family members who were waiting for their loved ones to be identified, and it took months and months of work," he says.

Dr James, who spent three tours in Thailand on rotation with her colleagues, says: "It was surreal – it was something that none of us had ever seen before.

"In a normal identification case, we would do a comparison between the dental records and the information we've gathered from the deceased person. But in a disaster, we're heavily reliant on photos – happy snaps, mostly, people smiling at the camera so we can see their teeth. These are very personal photographs, and that makes it harder. Also, the sheer number of children involved made it emotionally difficult work," she says.

Dr James and Associate Professor Winskog say they're proud of the work they and their colleagues – including forensic pathologist Professor Roger Byard AO, forensic odontologist Dr Giac Cirillo and dentist Dr Anthony Lake – contributed to in Thailand. They've also highlighted some positive changes that the disaster has led to closer to home.

"When we came back, I joined the State Disaster Victim Identification Committee, and we developed a new State plan for victim identification, which is critical for a situation such as this," Dr James says. "We also quickly realised that we were very short on forensic dentists in South Australia. We've since established a program that has trained and utilised general dentists in some of the least hazardous areas of forensic identification – that is, areas that carry the least emotional risk – to provide support to our main forensic team."

Both staff have high praise for the Thai people's response to the disaster. "The Thais are fantastic people, and they mobilised very quickly," Associate Professor Winskog says. "Their ability to construct infrastructure to help deal with the situation was very impressive – I don't think we would have coped as well as they did in such a short space of time."

Provided by University of Adelaide

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