

Title: **Episode 5. Picking up the pieces**

Speakers: Georgie Vestey, Dead Honest & Mo Oliver, DVI Expert, Kenyon International

Interview Transcription

Mo Oliver: Most of the people that we know who die, it's often as a known cause and as a result of a known interaction, and we manage to get our loved ones back quickly, they're identified quickly. That's what's different about these mass fatalities. It's the dragging out of this process, the loss of someone and it being months later before you have an identification, that leaves people in an awful state.

In my experience, families do want to know where their loved one is, whatever's happened to them, even if in the most tragic circumstances.

Georgie Vestey: Mo Oliver is an expert in DVI, that's Disaster Victim Identification, which means he locates and identifies human remains. It's a job that's taken him across the world, from excavating mass graves in the Balkans to recovering the victims of the Boxing Day Tsunami in Sri Lanka. More recently, Mo's work has brought him much closer to home, to London and the Grenfell Tower fire of 2017. This time it wasn't people he was recovering, but the personal possessions of those who had lost their lives.

But we start our conversation in Kosovo where Mo is searching for the innocent victims of the Balkan conflict.

I'm Georgie Vestey and this is Dead Honest.

Mo Oliver: We would follow up intelligence reports from the NATO forces; they were told that there might be mass graves. So we would have to go into villages, find people, and we did, who said, "When the tanks were coming in, half of us fled to the hills and stayed there in the trees for two weeks or so. Some of the people said, 'No I'm not leaving', and when we came back, we would find graves behind the village, and we assume that's our friends who remained behind".

We know now that many of those that were killed were actually taken over the borders and even dismembered and separated to prevent identification in the future. It's only now that the International Commission for Missing Persons, with really detailed DNA comparison, are finding some of those people that we were looking for at the time.

Georgie Vestey: So, the bodies that you were finding were dismembered and they were also being taken across borders quite deliberately?

Mo Oliver: What shocked me at the time, the people we were exhuming, they'd been handcuffed behind their backs with wire a lot of the times and there had been an execution shot through the back of the head. When I first exhumed the first body there, I couldn't understand why they had a scarf on, and of course it turned out to be a blindfold that they'd have had.

Some of the bodies were skeletonised even though this was only a year after, some of the bodies were whole at that time, and of course we had to try and identify who these people might be. So, a lot of that work was to remove the clothes, wash their clothes, photograph them and look for any evidence of identity.

Georgie Vestey: When you have taken a body out of a grave that is still recognisably a body, to take its clothes off, to wash those clothes, how do you detach yourself from the process, from the task; is it that you focus just on what's at hand?

Mo Oliver: Yeah, to make sure that the end result comes for families. We're doing it for a reason: to return those people and to find out what's happened, who's to blame for this incident, and to do that in as quick a manner as you can, in the most humane and compassionate way that you can, for those families.

Georgie Vestey: Did you ever in Kosovo come across the families whose relatives you had identified, and what interaction was that like?

Mo Oliver: You know, one of the things that disturbs people most of all in my experience has been when they're seeing photographs of those people when they're living and comparing them with a photograph, detailed forensic photographs, scene photographs, mortuary photographs, and seeing that that life's ended.

I've met families whose family members had been gunned down in deliberate attacks. One family of eight had been killed. I knew that information first and actually they identified the graves, but some of these stories are the individual ones. A young woman came to us. We exhumed her father and the woman jumped in the grave and held her father. She knelt down in the grave before we realised what was going to happen, and she picked up the skeleton effectively of her father.

There was a family member who came to us at the back of Pristina Hospital, when we were drying the clothes that we had taken from people. She identified a jacket that belonged to her husband and said that it had some money in it and sure enough, in the seam there was exactly the amount of money that she had said. So, she was able to show that it was her husband who had been lost for her for some time.

The worst thing is the unknown for people, and if I can help them find that information and help that family, then I will.

Georgie Vestey: So you then went from Kosovo, and your next big international deployment was going to Sri Lanka for the recovery of British nationals after the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004. Tell me about how it was for you arriving that day when you got to Sri Lanka; what did you find when you got there?

Mo Oliver: This was a natural disaster, unparalleled, and we drove out along the coast of Sri Lanka where the devastation had occurred. We saw the train, for instance, that you may remember had been swept over by a wave. We saw local fishermen's houses that had been completely wasted.

At that time I remember, to my complete regret, we stopped to go to the toilet at the back of this pile of rubble, me and another guy there. There was nowhere to go; it wasn't as if there were any public toilets, and this man came up to us and said, "You've just urinated on where my family are. They're buried under that pile of rubble", and to this day I think the person I was with was really disturbed by that incident.

Georgie Vestey: Talk to me about the conditions.

Mo Oliver: The smell there throughout the whole country at that time was the smell of death around the coast there; the very sweet and distinctive smell of death. The roads were gone, vehicles were gone, police stations were swept aside. So locally, people had to deal with the bodies that were on the beach and in many instances, they buried them in very quick, mass graves.

Sometimes at hospitals, they tended to bury people who they thought were foreigners in slightly separate graves and local people in another. The Sri Lankan government said, "We're very happy for you to identify your people and take them home, that's fine, but our people we want left in the mass graves. Our primary religion is Buddhism; we don't want to go through a mass identification process for our country people. Can you identify the foreigners?"

That's easier said than done, because people were comingled, so we really would only exhume a grave when there was some information that there was a foreigner there.

Georgie Vestey: Tell me about that identification process. What do you actually do when you do a DVI? You've found a body on the beach, it's come back to the mortuary, and then what happens?

Mo Oliver: DVI is always about matching information about the missing person with information from the post-mortem. The bodies will be individually numbered. We try and identify people by the quickest means, so if there are some clues at the beginning as to who they might be, those are probably the people we'd start working with.

Fingerprints: even after someone's been in water or even buried after a long time, it is possible to get fingerprints either from the epidermis or even the dermis. What we learned from the tsunami actually was that the glove of the hand was actually gone, and our fingerprint experts could even put that shed skin on their own hands and roll them to take the fingerprints of the people.

We're looking at dental work, forensic odontology. We'd have a forensic odontologist take high quality x-rays that could be compared, if we could find any dental information, or even any photographs of that person; and of course, we'd be taking samples for DNA. After a body has been putrefying for some time, then the standard

ways of taking DNA from a buccal swab, from deep muscle, may be gone. So in that case we're often into taking samples from their long bones. That means there has to be a certain amount of removal of the flesh in order that you can get a bit of their thigh bone, and then comes the clothing and jewellery, documenting it, photographing it.

Meanwhile the reported people who are missing; police generally around the world in all those countries are going to those families, taking their descriptive details, going to their dentists to try and find out the latest x-rays. Have you got any photographs of them with what jewellery they've got? Looking for samples of DNA and also, fingerprints. Now, that's quite a difficult thing to try and get someone's fingerprints when they're not there. Children now sometimes at school roll their finger to get their dinner at school. So, we might be going to databases like that to see if there's an imprint of someone's finger there.

So whilst this post-mortem is being carried out, the equally difficult, if not more difficult process, is going on of speaking to families. And at the time when they don't know whether their family member is actually involved, we are saying, "They may be involved in this and this, if they are involved, would possibly lead to their identification". Now imagine going very quickly into a family after that and saying, "We need to know where their dentist is". The family liaison officers or the special assistance team members who go to those families have to be really skilled individuals who do that at the worst times.

So it's the comparison process. Once that identification is believed to be correct, it's brought together in a file and then taken to what's called an identification panel, where the people proposing the identification say, "I propose that ante-mortem number X called Mark Oliver is identical with the body that was recovered at this location", and a presentation is being made to say how we come to that identification.

That is before death certification; it's before the viewing of course. What we cannot have in a mass fatality mortuary is people viewing the bodies and trying to identify people visually; it will lead and does lead to mistakes.

Georgie Vestey; That must be a very difficult thing to balance; the need of a family, because they are so certain they would know their own child, to have to wait until all of those processes have been completed. And by the time those processes have been completed, that person that they love is possibly far more degraded and unrecognisable and more traumatic to view. Does that have to be considered?

Mo Oliver: I've had to deal with mistaken identifications; I'll give you an example. A family member in the tsunami did go into the mortuary, quite a respected person in their own community, who came out and said, "I've identified my daughter", and they convinced the coroner at that time that who they believed was their daughter should be flown back to their home country.

By the time the body was flown back home, there were dental records available, and it was found straight away that it was someone from an entirely different country; it wasn't that person. So then, we were left with a body from Sri Lanka actually in the UK which should have been destined for another country entirely.

So, at that point there were two mistakes. Where was the person that he was trying to identify, and in fact we did identify shortly after; but then we had to explain to the family, or the family had to be explained to, "Your family member has been mistakenly identified". They could have been buried; they could have been cremated. It is really not the case that you can tell who those people are.

We imagine, through living, that we will always have our handbag with us, our glasses on, our wallets in our back pocket. I'm afraid after a mass fatality, a natural disaster, other people's wallets will go in your pocket. You will lose anything you carry; you will lose your facial identification features; you don't look the same. People can't identify you.

Georgie Vestey: Disaster victim identification is a science that has become far better known in the public consciousness with the Grenfell Tower fire in London. I know you weren't involved in that on the DVI aspect of it, but there was a lot of criticism at the time about the length of time it was taking. What made that situation particularly unique from a DVI perspective?

Mo Oliver: It's one of the most complex comparison incidents you could imagine. Those people were going in when there was still water rushing down from the tower.

They didn't know if there were dead people in those rooms or not. They didn't know whether there was one or two, or if it was the intended occupant. They didn't know if people had gone into that flat and huddled together for safety.

I've been in Grenfell Tower on several occasions and been into those most burnt flats, and people aren't recognisable as humans. There are small remains, a jawbone, the tiniest bones are mixed in with the remains of sofas, of furniture. They are comingled with other people. DNA may be extremely difficult to obtain from those remains. Fingerprints aren't going to be possible to obtain from those particular people.

So what about dental? Well, because of the high temperatures in Grenfell Tower, even some of the teeth may have come out of the jaw bones there, which meant forensic odontologists would have had to rebuild the mouth before they could even say what people's teeth are like. And maybe the crowns had been missing on those occasions, so actually they're trying to do identifications from the roots.

So what about the ante-mortem side? Where do you tend to get people's fingerprints from? You get them from people's houses. These houses were burnt; that wasn't available. Where's the first place that you get DNA from? You might go and get toothbrushes, you might go and get clothes, you might get shoes from people's houses; not available for that. So the next place for DNA is to find their families. No one really knew who was in those flats at that time, so finding out where their family members were all around the world.

So those people who say that the identification process should have taken place more quickly, the first people that would have been identified were likely to be people where there was ante-mortem information available, but probably most importantly where there were whole bodies that hadn't died in the most intense parts of the fire.

So, to actually carry out that process there and to communicate with families how difficult that was, and the public, is a difficult process. What do I say about that? Provision of family assistance to those families affected is vital and that clearly didn't happen well enough there.

Georgie Vestey: As somebody who responds to international disasters, as somebody with an expertise in this, were you shocked that that should happen in probably one of the wealthiest suburbs of this country, that we were so unprepared?

Mo Oliver: I was shocked when that was happening, yeah. One of my first thoughts was, "How have we got to the situation where fire safety standards and inspection regime has dropped so that we could allow this to happen in the first place?" I was appalled at the thought of that.

I was surprised we did not see a more cohesive response, because I know that they did have plans, but there is a certain paralysis that comes in after some of these disasters. The enormity of it shocks everyone. Everyone imagines there is one person in charge; no, there are several organisations involved. Coordination is difficult, but helping those families and being compassionate, that was absent as far as I could see; absent.

Georgie Vestey: But your company was involved in the repatriation of personal effects to the families who were residents at Grenfell. Tell me about what happened there.

Mo Oliver: We recovered those highly burnt, smoke-damaged personal effects from those flats for sentimental reasons really. These are the only things that these people have left. We know that those items are of huge significance to families. Imagine if you found your grandmother's wedding ring there or the things that they'd grown up with?

We carried out a really detailed process of photographing what we'd recovered, cleaning those items, jewellery for instance, and get them back to a really good state so that families can receive them and keep those items again. It gives them a bit of their life back. It's a laborious process, but it's one that is really important to families.

Georgie Vestey: What has moved you the most about those possessions being reunited with those families?

Mo Oliver: Seeing a family open a box and together look at those items. I saw one family looking at a dog bowl where the dog had died. They look back at a buckled

watch and go, "My God, how hot was that in the fire?" and them looking at each other and remembering that and realising the enormity of what had gone on.

Georgie Vestey: Recovering people's personal effects after a disaster is something that's actually quite a new phenomenon. Why is it important?

Mo Oliver: What has happened to them is other people have taken over their lives and told them what must happen, and what we will do with personal effects and what we do with family assistance is try and give people that ownership over those lives again, give them choices to make, explain what those choices might mean, so that we can lead them to being back on their feet again. The provision of information, things, allows people to recognise what has gone on and to begin to move on to their new normal, but yet you know that incident will live with that family for their living memory.

Now for me, the fact that I can use the things that I've learned in public service, working in forensics, working in investigation, and help those people to carry out their wishes for what they need is the most important thing that I've ever done.

Georgie Vestey: I want to thank Mo Oliver for being so open about his work. If you want to know more about Kenyon International, the company he works for, there's a link to their website on the episode's show notes; and if you have any thoughts about the programme, I'd love to hear from you. You'll find my contact details at deadhonest.com or on Twitter [@deadhonesttalk](https://twitter.com/deadhonesttalk).

Until next time...



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