

## **The Ethics of Post-Conflict and Post-Disaster DNA Identification**

By Dena Davis, J.D., PhD. Presidential Chair in Health -- Humanities/Social Sciences

I serve on the Ethics Advisory Board for an NIH-funded project hosted by Carnegie-Mellon University, on the Ethics of Post-Conflict and Post-Disaster DNA Identification. Last week we had our first big conference. People attended from all over the world, people who spend their working day knee-deep in corpses in huge pits in Guatemala, searching to identify individuals but also for forensic evidence that would bring the perpetrators to justice; people working in NYC with bone fragments from 9/11/2001; people who identify victims after earthquakes and tsunamis. We ethicists were scattered among the working groups, with the mission of "raising ethical issues," but that proved difficult, almost impossible. The stories and experiences we were hearing were so overwhelming, we all felt quite diffident about raising subtle, nuanced ethical issues. For example, one woman in my group described attempts to identify her half-brother, who had been tortured to death during the apartheid regime in South Africa. She was asked to provide DNA from a parent, but explained the difficulties there, in that her father had murdered her mother many years ago "and now our side of the family has no contact with him." What can one respond to that, except keep one's mouth shut and listen?