

Probe could reveal much about lives: experts. FORENSIC LOOK AT RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL GRAVES COULD REVEAL MUCH, AND HELP FAMILIES TO HEAL
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Dr. Michael Pollanen has helped investigate the graves of missing people in a grim catalogue of past and present conflict zones, from Cambodia to Iraq and the Central African Republic.

But Ontario's chief forensic pathologist never thought that such a project — where remains are unearthed and probed for clues to their identity and demise — might be necessary in Canada.

Then came the discovery of what appear to be the unmarked graves of 215 Indigenous children at a B.C. residential school.

“That is the point of the emotional turmoil I've been going through the last few days,” said Pollanen. “This is the work many of us do in the context of highly unstable countries ... I didn't expect to be confronted with that reality here.”

He and other experts say it is up to the relatives of the dead children and affected First Nations to decide what to do with the graves.

But if they opt for a full investigation, even skeletal remains of those young people could reveal much about their tragically shortened lives, they say.

A team that would include specially trained forensic pathologists, anthropologists and archeologists might be able to identify — just from bones — the signs of disease like tuberculosis, evidence of abuse or the effects of malnutrition, said Pollanen.

“It's amazing how much information that can be gleaned from a careful skeletal examination,” he said.

DNA tests — if genetic material can be extracted from bones and teeth — could link them to living relatives.

But it is unlikely given the probable state of the remains that investigators would be able to pinpoint with certainty the causes of death, said Pollanen.

Dr. Pauline Alakija, a forensic pathologist at the University of Alberta, agreed that finding signs of disease or violence is possible, but fears that the passage of time would make those tasks difficult.

The Kamloops Indian Residential School was opened in 1890 and operated until 1969 under Catholic Church administration.

“The period of time that has gone by, I'm not sure that a lot can be told,” Alakija said. “A really big question is, why are we finding this now? ... Because there would have been far more information 30 years ago, 20 years ago, 10 years ago.”

Chief Rosanne Casimir of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation announced last week that ground-penetrating radar had identified the hidden graves at the school site.

On Tuesday, a spokeswoman for the United Nations Human Rights Office called on Canadian governments to investigate such deaths and identify remains as part of the reconciliation process.

The student memorial register of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has identified more than 4,000 Indigenous children who died while at the schools, though it's believed the true number is much larger. The register estimates that as many as 400 burial grounds exist across the country.

One “primary cause” of mortality was infectious disease, especially tuberculosis, in crowded, often-unsanitary quarters, says a report for the commission by Lakehead

University anthropologist Scott Hamilton. Physical and sexual abuse, neglect and malnutrition were also common at the schools, the commission and survivors have reported. Deaths became “increasingly rare” after the 1940s, Hamilton wrote. The evidence suggests that what the radar found in Kamloops was a roughshod cemetery — not a mass grave as some media reported — indicating a few deaths per year over decades, said Tracy Rogers, a forensic anthropologist at the University of Toronto. The tragedy is that families were separated and not informed of their children's passing, she said. The site could either be excavated or formally designated as a cemetery — “whichever option the families of the children prefer,” said Rogers. Plans are already underway to exhume the remains and possibly carry out forensic examinations, Terry Teegee, Assembly of First Nations regional chief, told CBC. Dr. Rebekah Jacques, a forensic pathologist of Metis background, said she's been working with a number of Indigenous communities as they consider whether they're ready for the “emotional labour” of examining the remains of children who died at residential schools. The London, Ont.-based specialist said a scientific, medico-legal study could be worthwhile since “all causes of death are possible.” It would be important, though, to put Indigenous people at the forefront of that process, she said, noting that they are “a diverse group of people that have different cultures and belief systems that ought to be incorporated into this process.” The work would be long, complex and expensive, said Pollanen, who also said it should be driven by the wishes of affected families and communities. Any investigative team ideally ought to be led by an Indigenous forensic pathologist, he said, pointing to Jacques and Dr. Kona Williams in Sudbury as two “absolutely fantastic” such specialists. It is key, too, that all the investigators be trained in forensic sciences, said Alakija. “The last thing you want is people to be dabbling in this,” she said. “We owe these families the respect of having people who have the proper expertise.” The first step in any investigation of graves is to gather as much research as possible — from archives, individuals and other sources — to establish the context, said Pollanen. Then the team would need to identify living relatives of the children and collect DNA samples from them. Once exhumed, it's always possible the remains would include tissue and skin, but they're likely to be skeletal at this point, the pathologists say. Even so, those bones can reveal much, including evidence of malnutrition or infectious disease. The inflammation caused by TB in the lungs sometimes spreads to the rib cage, leaving lasting marks of the disease, said Pollanen. Evidence of broken bones could also be quite illuminating, said Alakija. A fracture that had fully healed might just be evidence of a childhood accident. But multiple breaks unhealed at death or improperly treated could indicate abuse, she said. The results of any investigation should be presented transparently and honestly to the relevant families, said Pollanen. He said the relatives of victims of conflict or oppression he has briefed in other countries were “universally appreciative.” “They have this overwhelming need to know what happened to their loved one,” said the pathologist. “Providing those answers is very powerful.”