

For the good of forensic science

by Kory Glover
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QUEBEC – A BODY FARM? DON'T WORRY, IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK... KIND OF. CANADA IS OPENING THEIR VERY FIRST "BODY FARM" IN BÉCANCOUR, QUE., JUST ACROSS THE RIVER FROM TROIS-RIVIÈRES TO HELP POLICE UNDERSTAND AND UNCOVER MORE IN FORENSIC STUDIES.

"It's essentially what we would call a human decomposition facility, we don't tend to use the word "body farm," but I understand that everyone else does," said researcher Dr. Shari Forbes. "It is a high security facility and it's a place where people donate their bodies for science so that we can study how the body decomposes after death."

After a few seasons of CSI, forensic science has come a long way in the past couple of decades but there is still much more to learn. According to Dr. Forbes, approximately 30 different disciplines are going to be studied at this facility that can help taphonomy, the study of preservation, research growth and expansion.

"Just to give some examples, my work is looking at the decomposition odour and trying to understand, chemically, what that odour comprises to better understand how cadaver dogs locate victims," she said. "So, my work is based on search and recovery of

victims and how we can improve our ability to do that."

There will also be plenty of entomologists at this decomposition facility to research more in finding out how long a person has been deceased.

"All of this is from a police perspective," Dr. Forbes continued. "If we were to recover a body that had insect larvae, they can actually determine how long those larvae have been present and how long that person has been in that environment."

Other aspects of research at this facility that will be studied include time since death and how to identify a victim, using only teeth, fingerprints or DNA. From the different range of bodies they're expecting to use, different cadavers will be used to recreate different scenarios for different results, some requested by the police themselves.

"Basically, any death investigation that involves a victim, our research wants to assist," said Dr. Forbes. "We would try to recreate scenarios that the police specifically request. We'll recreate missing persons who may have perished on the surface, recovered on the ground. We'll recreate victims of homicide who may have been concealed in a shallow burial and, on a very small scale, we'll try to recreate mass disaster situations where there's multiple peoples. We do all of this

to try and prove our methods for searching, recovering and identifying victims in any of those scenarios."

The research that is expected to come from this study will all be new according to Dr. Forbes, so there is no expected conclusion to what this research facility will find. This is because, while decomposition has been studied in Canada before, this will be the first time human carcasses will be used instead of animal.

"Although we have studied decomposition in Canada previously, it has been using animal remains, typically pig carcasses," she said. "We've opened one of these facilities in Australia and our research has shown that the process can be quite different between pig and human. Even though we continue to test with pigs, I would like to apply the hypothesis we do with humans; it's really the benefit of using a facility where people donate their bodies so that we can get more accurate information for the police."

However, unfortunately, not every single body can be used in their research. Certain restrictions had to be put into place to protect the employees at the decomposition facility and not interfere with the results.

"We have set some restrictions, we can't accept bodies that have undergone an autopsy," said Dr. Forbes. "We can't accept

someone who died from an infectious disease for health and safety reasons. There are a few other exclusions but generally we're more flexible."

You wouldn't think that a place like this would need high security, but you would be wrong. Not that people are wanting to sneak in for immoral or unnatural reasons, but it's more to feed into their curiosity.

But still, precautions need to be made in order to ensure that the facility and the research remains unaltered or untouched.

"We're going to have high security at this facility," said Dr. Forbes. "We have a high security fence, which basically means it's a very tall fence, dug underground so you can't dig under, with barbed wire on top so you can't climb over. We also have CCTV cameras with inferred imaging that runs 24/7 to detect any kind of intrusion."

In closing, Dr. Forbes and the rest of the employees at the "body farm" hope to do their best to not only benefit the police but all of forensic science to better help solve crimes and help people feel safer.

"We've collaborated on these types of projects to assist internationally on human rights investigations," she said.

This facility aims for an opening before the end of 2019, preferably the fall season.



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