Boston Bombing: Finding Evidence In The ER

In the aftermath of Monday's marathon bombing, emergency physicians here are tasked not only with saving lives but also saving evidence.

The challenges posed by that dual charge are daunting, but not impossible said Louis Alarcon, MD, of University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

"We collaborate closely with forensic pathologists and law enforcement," said Alarcon, medical director of trauma surgery. "Our first priority is to save the patient's life -- life and limb over everything. Once we achieve those goals, we also have a strong duty to the evidence."

Oscar Guillamondegui, MD, of Vanderbilt Multidisciplinary Traumatic Brain Injury Clinic in Nashville, said that after treating the victim, "the next step would be to identify if there are foreign bodies, and in the case of a blast event, such as in Boston, that would be the shrapnel that remains within the tissue."

That 'evidence' should then be handled as any pathology specimen from a patient: It would be collected in the appropriate container, sealed, documented in the chain-of-command paperwork and sent to a pathologist who turns it over to the appropriate authorities, he said.

At Tufts Medical Center in Boston after Monday's marathon bombing, doctors worked with law enforcement to collect and save fragments of shrapnel that became projectiles with the force of the bombing, Robert Osgood, MD, told Boston's WBUR-FM.

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