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**Australian dentists honoured in MH 17 disaster**

Forensic dentists Russell Lain and William Saunderson have been given top honours by the Australian Federal Police for their work in sourcing the dental records of passengers on Malaysian Airlines flight MH 17, shot down over the Ukraine in 2014.

Lain and Saunderson, from the Sydney Dental Hospital, were awarded for helping identify the Australians among the 283 passengers and 15 crew killed in the crash.

Their award comes as the final report into the MH 17 disaster was handed down last week.

Lain and Saunderson have been identifying Australian disaster victims for more than 20 years, and worked on the 1997 Thredbo landslide, the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings and the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, which killed more than 230,000 across 14 countries.

“In the MH 17 investigation, we worked in the ante mortem team which involved sourcing the dental records of the 38 Australian victims on board, and entering it into a database that would help the team on the ground identify them,” says Dr Lain.

In many disasters, forensic odontologists also x-ray the teeth of victims delivered to mortuaries and compare them with the person’s dental records to make a positive identification.

“To have a loved one returned is a significant part of the grieving process,” says Dr Saunderson.

“Some families do not know what happened to their loved one so to be able to identify someone and bring them home has a big effect on a community. You are helping people,” says Dr Saunderson.

For Dr Lain, it is “a way for an ordinary dentist to make a substantial contribution to the community.”

But it does have a cost.

“When you walk into a disaster zone and see scores of bodies lying there, it does have an emotional effect,” he says.