

VITAL Photography Task Group Response to STRP Report

The Standard Guide for Post Mortem Examination Photography is a culmination of several years of work by the Photography Task Group, which stands by the standard as it is written. After initial comments from the Scientific & Technical Review Panel (STRP) were received, several changes were made for clarification purposes. However, the VITAL Photography Task Group does not agree that the updates weakened the standard.

Some suggestions from the STRP, especially those stating minimum resolution and file format standards, were rejected as arbitrary. For example, resolution requirements should be set for the reproduction of evidence, not for the camera itself, as distance to the subject will significantly affect resolution.

Additionally, there is a broad consensus that using the JPG format for documentation is acceptable. According to the Scientific Working Group for Imaging Technology (SWG-IT), *“Category One images are used to demonstrate what the photographer or recording device witnessed but are not analyzed by subject matter experts. These can include, but are not limited to, the following:*

- *General crime scene or investigative images*
- *Surveillance images*
- *Autopsy images*
- *Documentation of items of evidence in a laboratory*
- *Arrest photographs, such as mug shots”*

https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/about-us/lab/forensic-science-communications/fsc/july2005/standards/2005_07_standards01.htm

The guide further defines examination quality images and states, per 9.8.1 “...the highest resolution and least compression available on the camera, lossless RAW is preferred”.

Additional responses regarding referenced Report Components and listed below:

4.2) This standard is the result of a consensus among several professional forensic photographers from varying agencies across the United States. This new standard sets the bar for “...describing specific photography and lighting techniques for documenting post mortem examinations.” The detail in 4.2 does not identify what topics in this guide require further research.

4.3) The VITAL Photography Task Group also believes that additional research should be done to determine the sufficiency of image quality. Research needs to be conducted to determine the resolution requirements to reproduce certain types of evidence such as bite marks and impressions. However, this is outside of the scope of this guide.

5.1.1) The task group disagrees with using the term “dirty photo”. Aside from being vague, the term brings up pornographic connotations. We feel the standard already adequately describes documenting the body before cleaning.

5.1.2) The term “as is” is already defined and does not need further definition

6.1.1) While it is more difficult to master than using ambient light, images lit using flash provide more information and usable detail. When used off camera at the appropriate angle, an external flash will be much more effective than ambient light in reducing glare or hotspots on wet, shiny, and/or reflective surfaces. The external flash can also be used more effectively to accentuate texture and avoid unwanted shadows. Also, ambient light seldom allows using the base (native, lowest) ISO without the use of a tripod or other camera support. Seeing as the vast majority of post mortem examination photos are taken handheld, this an important distinction. Furthermore, through the use of an external flash, the camera's highest flash sync shutter speed, and a white balance setting of "Flash", color reproduction becomes much more accurate and consistent, precisely because it reduces or eliminates the ambient light and mixing of color temperatures. It is this task group's recommendation that an external flash always be used with the aforementioned settings to provide the best results possible.

Additionally, statements such as “most professional photographers” doesn't carry any weight unless backed by a poll or statistics. The task group is made up of 6 professional photographers who all agree with the recommendation of using flash.