



D25 Voluntary Community DNA Testing

Robin P. Napper, BA, Centre for Forensic Science, University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, Western Australia, Australia*

The goals of this presentation are to describe the best practice and procedure for Law Enforcement Agencies in conducting a voluntary based DNA screen in a serious crime.

During the early hours of New Years Day 1999, a 91-year-old resident of the township of Wee Waa went to bed. Rita Knight had lived all her life in the outback town of Wee Waa, some 600km NW of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. She was a highly respected person who had lived all her life in the same house. A regular churchgoer, this wonderful woman did not have an enemy in the world.

Later that night, someone broke into her house and attacked her in bed. She was beaten and then suffocated unconscious, and as a final indignity raped whilst unconscious. Despite her appalling injuries she survived. The shock and horror of this attack stunned the community. A massive police investigation worked for many months, but sadly failed to trace the offender. The only clue left to the police was a DNA profile from semen in the vaginal swab.

Due to community pressure, 16 months later the police set about taking voluntary DNA samples from all 600 males in the Wee Waa community. A criminal and geographic profile set guidelines for the screening. This screening was the first intelligence led DNA screen in Australia. The exercise received enormous media coverage in Australia and worldwide including the U.S., in particular NBC news.

There was no legislation at that time in Australia to force men to give a DNA sample. The screening was based on best practice techniques the author had employed in similar investigations in the U.K.

Set criteria have to be met before such a screening is embarked upon. Namely there must be a compact geographic area. The crime scene DNA sample must be attributable to the offender. Most importantly there must be a supportive community. A media strategy is formulated between the investigating officers and the criminal profiler.

In April 2000, a team of police went to Wee Waa and invited men who fitted the profile to volunteer a DNA sample. The community response was incredible. Over 95% of the eligible male population volunteered samples. They were queuing up outside the police station before opening at 8:00 a.m. each day.

Local detectives already had a list of suspects, but insufficient evidence to support an arrest and interview. Part of the investigating strategy was that these suspects would be invited to give a DNA sample along with a SCAN (scientific content analysis) questionnaire.

One of the suspects left town the day before the police team arrived. Stephen James Boney lived 300 meters from the victim's house. On 11 April 2000, he was traced working on a farm 50 km from Wee Waa. A local Officer interviewed him and requested a voluntary DNA sample. After a minute thinking, Boney gave the sample and completed the SCAN form.

All the samples were then transported back to Sydney for testing and comparison with the crime scene sample. The day before this testing was due to commence, 17 April 2000, Boney surrendered himself to the police at Wee Waa. He admitted being responsible for the attack. A further DNA sample was taken from him along with a full written confession. Comparison of Boney's sample with the crime scene sample proved to be a perfect match. He was then charged with the attack and rape of Rita Knight.

On 20 October 2000, Boney appeared before the Moree District Court and pleaded guilty to all the charges. He was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment. The public of Wee Waa gave unqualified support to the methods used by the police to capture Boney. The template of joining traditional policing with a forensically led approach based on criminal and geographic profiling proved highly successful. This template could be adapted for use in the U.S. in communities where the criteria for such a screening are met.

At the time of the investigation the author was a Detective Superintendent seconded from the U.K. to the New South Wales police in Sydney. He currently works in Perth as Director of Research and Development at the Centre for Forensic Science, University of Western Australia.

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