



B41 So Where Do We Go From Here? Defining Roles for the Forensic Scientist in Criminal Investigations

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This presentation will illustrate the changing role of the forensic scientist in criminal investigations and discuss how the forensic scientist can influence this change.

This presentation will draw attention to the changing role of the forensic scientist in criminal investigations and illustrate how we can influence our future.

Never before has forensic science enjoyed the exposure that it currently receives. Dramatic depictions and televised trials have increased the public's awareness of the value of physical evidence. Increasingly, juries influenced by these forces are expecting more from criminal investigations, often to what seems like unrealistic extremes.

Yet if we look critically, are these extremes so unrealistic? Who would have imagined the level of discrimination that we now regularly obtain with biological evidence? The significance of this advance cannot be understated. Nor can the jarring effect that this advance has had on the rest of the field.

Forensic science has changed in response to this new individualizing potential. Data basing systems have converted DNA results, formerly only useful once a suspect had been identified, to a valuable investigative tool. Unfortunately the change was not always a positive one. Juggling already limited budgets, laboratory administrators have been forced to reevaluate their priorities. Some even choosing to forgo conventional trace analysis altogether.

The nature of the scientist performing the analysis has also changed. As tools of our trade become more complex, it is becoming increasingly difficult to resist the slippery slope toward specialization. Some would argue that this natural phenomenon represents the evolution of the field. If left unchecked, this change would be better classified as erosion. This is not to say that the specialist does not play an essential part in contemporary analysis, only that the specialist must be used in conjunction with a generalist to maintain the necessary perspective. This combined scientific approach will allow us to lay the root-system which will ultimately change how forensic science is practiced.

Nowhere is the generalist viewpoint more important than at the inception of the investigation. Here at the scene of the crime, critical information can be recognized, documented, and collected. Failure at this stage will prevent any subsequent laboratory analysis, no matter how sophisticated. Even the staunchest opponents will concede this point. Yet still, forensic scientists have gladly abdicated their role at the crime scene.

Our investigatory process is fundamentally flawed when non-scientists are charged with posing the scientific questions that will dictate all subsequent analysis. This error is further compounded when laboratories are relegated to solely a reactive role. Much like the proverbial "black box," investigators and prosecuting attorneys will indicate the testing they require as a case progresses and the laboratory will just be a mythical place where the answer is generated.

While this is our present, it does not have to be our future. More so now than ever, we have the ability to change how science will be practiced in criminal investigations. What better way can forensic scientists serve as a counterbalancing weight between truth and justice than through charting a team approach, and by ensuring that investigator and scientist work side-by-side with scientific assessment of the evidence at every stage of the process?

This paper will focus on current realities of the situation and outline a systematic approach for implementing these much-needed changes to our role as forensic scientist in criminal investigations.

Scientific Assessment, Crime Scene, Future Role