



B22 Fulfilling the Role of the Forensic Scientist: The New Orleans Police Department as a Case Study and Argument for Greater Emphasis on Actualized Science

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn the emphasis of active casework and interagency communication over the strict revalidation of accepted techniques. Practical examples from the working New Orleans Police Department structure will be provided as a starting point for efforts in the attendee's lab or law enforcement agency.

Most public sector forensic scientists have to face the choice of research and validation versus casework and communication. Using the NOPD as a model, this presentation will demonstrate the need for scientifically trained personnel to move from the academic emphasis on completeness to the more flexible "triage" emphasis on responsiveness and inter/intra-agency communication. This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by serving to provide examples of creative solutions to the conflict, and to continuing the current discussion of the role of the forensic scientist in criminal investigations.

Forensic science is defined as the application of science to questions of law and is, by nature, an applied science, implemented without the benefit of the controlled conditions present in more traditional sciences. Recent accreditation, validation, and quality assurance/quality control efforts aim to regulate science to prevent the acquisition of false data and to make results more reproducible. But this inherently desirable process can go too far if insistence on formal validation protocols in applied forensic labs creates an impediment to a laboratory's expansion of its capabilities or its ability to meet the needs of the law enforcement community. With the challenges of understaffing and underfunding facing many applied forensic labs, most forensic scientists have to face the choice of research and validation or casework and communication.

At the 2004 meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, a series of presentations in the Criminalistics section addressed the involvement of the forensic scientist at the crime scene and in criminal investigations. Widespread agreement exists that scientists in forensic science must be involved, as non-scientists cannot be expected to produce skillful applications of the scientific method to applied casework. As with any science, experimentation leading to expansion of capabilities and new technologies is vital. Forensic science has an impressive cadre of researchers whose full-time mission is the dissemination of improved technology to the practitioners in the field. But the practitioners have their own challenges to meet: timely casework results—in not only an adjudicative role, but in the underutilized investigative mode—and inter-agency communication must be paramount for the applied forensic scientist to fulfill his or her function. Cumbersome validation studies that prevent or delay the usage of generally accepted techniques can be a significant hindrance to job performance.

The New Orleans Police Department is a working model demonstrating the vital need for scientifically trained personnel to move from the academic emphasis on completeness to the more flexible "triage" emphasis on responsiveness and communication. Criminalists at the NOPD Crime Lab have faced the considerable caseload of any forensic scientist in a large city, compounded with drastically low wages and a malnourished laboratory budget. In a situation where responsive casework management, investigative involvement of forensic professionals, and better interagency communication are balanced against the forensic community's demand for in-house validation and classic structure, it rapidly becomes clear that more creative approaches are necessary.

For example, in response to the identification of a lack of communication between branches of law enforcement in New Orleans as one of the primary obstacles facing crimefighting efforts in the city, district attorneys have been invited to COMSTAT meetings, while homicide detectives sit in on the DA's weekly strategy sessions. Additionally, the constant need for low turnaround times on priority cases has prompted the metamorphosis of the Forensic Light Unit (FLU), a two-man on-call unit, from a reactive latent print unit into a proactive investigative response unit. New techniques are responsibly and effectively put into practice by FLU with appropriate QA/QC protocols, but the predominant emphasis in this new model is the direct application of scientific expertise to questions of law provided by investigators and attorneys, and the conscious commitment of time and energy to maintaining open lines of communication. The success of this new emphasis is evident in both anecdotal and quantifiable levels of satisfaction among investigators.

In applying creative problem solving to overwhelming demands on time and resources, the department has definitively demonstrated, as prominent members of the field have suggested, that "doing the job right cannot supplant doing the right job."

Forensic Science, Validation, Communication