



Jurisprudence Section – 2009

E2 The CSI Effect in the Australian and Canadian Criminal Justice Systems

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain insight into the particular issues Australian and Canadian jurors face when dealing with complex scientific evidence. The issues faced by jurors are mainly related to what they watch on crime-related television shows. In particular, this session will inform attendees about the influence of television on the understanding of forensic evidence.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by providing information about the target audience which can assist in framing reports and courtroom presentations (giving evidence). The information provided in this session will assist the forensic community and the ends of justice generally by providing an insight into the knowledge base of jurors, permitting an adaptation of focusing of “teaching” style used by lawyers and experts in court.

The preliminary findings suggest that potential jurors are educated, but not always correctly, about forensic evidence from watching television shows. The concerns raised are amenable to solution, provided forensic scientists and lawyers are aware of the misconceptions which arise. Benefits of exposure to such shows were also apparent especially in interviews with Australian jurors who showed a willingness to engage with unfamiliar technical or scientific evidence, and a healthy scepticism in relation to the more extravagant claims of such programs. Differences in both information and misinformation were apparent between those who watched such shows and those who did not.

The purpose of this research project was to develop insight into the factors that influence jury interpretations, perceptions and understanding of forensic evidence within the Canadian and Australian criminal justice systems. Television shows such as CBS’s CSI and its spinoffs CSI: Miami; CSI: Las Vegas, and CSI: New York has sparked the imagination of thousands of students who want to become forensic scientists. The shows’ fictional portrayal of crime scene investigations has prompted real demands for DNA and other scientific evidence from prosecutors and defense lawyers in the courtroom. It’s what lawyers and judges refer to as the “CSI effect.” This phenomenon was studied using a triangulated data collection methodology involving the following: the collection of television guides and reports, which included an examination of the content of the crime-related shows; the distribution of 605 surveys to College students who would be considered jury eligible; and the qualitative findings from interviews with real jurors. This data provides the background and preliminary findings of how crime-related television shows might contribute to whether or not the so-called CSI effect resides in the minds of Canadian and Australian jurors.

CSI Effect, Evidence, Juries