D13 Forensic Polygraph Testing: A Response to the Call for Strengthening the Forensic Sciences

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of how polygraph testing fits in the general forensic sciences. In addition, attendees will learn how practitioners of this forensic technique of polygraph testing, like a number of other techniques, struggle with the demand for better "science" and improvements in the credentials and training of practitioners.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by presenting two points of information: (1) the polygraph testing community, as will be discussed in the presentation, has a strong historical connection to the forensic sciences, even though in many applications today may not be apparent to uninformed observers; and,

(2) the recent reviews by the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences, of polygraph testing and, then, of the forensic sciences, have promoted a strong and sustained interest in leaders in the polygraph testing community to attend to the call for a strengthening of the field in line with the NRC's recommendations. Attendees will learn how these recommendations are being addressed and what remains to be done.

The National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) released a public report on polygraph testing in 2003 which was based on an extensive review of the available empirical research. The report was widely publicized and was generally considered critical of polygraph testing. The NRC's initial charge was to consider the use of polygraph testing in the context of personnel security screening, e.g. police and intelligence agency applicant testing

and government employee security clearances. However, after a review of the literature, it was determined that there was a significant lack of empirical evidence regarding the use of polygraph testing in screening applications. The NRC subsequently expanded their efforts to include "specific-incident testing," which involves the use of polygraph testing for forensic purposes, such as in criminal investigations. The NRC concluded that "specific incident polygraph tests can discriminate lying from truth telling at rates well above chance, though well below perfection." Additionally, the NRC provided commentary and recommendations regarding a number of additional issues in polygraph testing that needed attention. This included special emphasis on the need for more and better research, careful attention to the development of theory and theory directed research, and a strengthening of the "standardization" of the testing process. Though the 2003 NRC report had considerable influence on guiding some changes in the polygraph community, many of its recommendations were viewed with considerable skepticism, which likely occurred as a result of several issues noted by the polygraph community. One of the most important of these was that the NRC committee which was established to review the research evidence was comprised only of persons who had no interest or involvement in the polygraph testing community, whether as researchers, practitioners, or scholars who focused on the topic. In short, the committee lacked representative spokespersons with personal and professional experience in the field who could have balanced the strong, abstract considerations the committee focused on with specific concerns that arise in real-world application. Such input may have led to a report that was more influential than was actually the case in this instance. Unlike the NRC report on polygraph testing, the now widely known and highly influential 2009 Report on the forensic sciences by the National Academy of Sciences included a number of multi-discipline scientists and multiple persons with real-life experience in a number of forensic practices. This, has led to a report with far greater influence than the 2003 NRC report and, has led to a response to the more recent NRC report by leaders in the polygraph community that has a greater sense of direction and urgency, than was the case previously. The recommendations of the 2009 NAS Report will be discussed and consider them in relation to disparities among practitioners in the polygraph community. Concerns in the polygraph testing community about how to deal with enhanced research activities, accreditation of training facilities, certification of practitioners, quality control and other oversight mechanisms will be highlighted. Further, this paper will outline the significant changes that have already occurred in the field and the changes which are planned for implementation in the near future.

From this presentation attendees will have a better understanding of forensic polygraph testing and why, even though such testing may differ in nature from other forensic techniques, the difficulties and disparities in the polygraph examiner community are similar to those in other areas that were considered in the 2009 NAS Report. Furthermore, this presentation will provide attendees with information regarding the current state of

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the polygraph testing field and how its leaders intend to strengthen its role as a forensic science.
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