



D58 Reinforcing the Value of Continuing Education in Forensic Science

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The goal of this presentation is to provide the forensic science community with information regarding the value of continuing education in forensic science for practitioners.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing information regarding the value of continuing education in the field of forensic science.

With a variety of disciplines, forensic scientists require a complex combination of skills, knowledge, and experience in order to carry out their role effectively. It is widely recognized that maintenance of skills and knowledge over time plays an important part in ensuring that standards of practice are current and that competence in the position is promoted. Continuing education for the forensic scientist is structured educational activities designed or intended to support their continuing development and to maintain and enhance their competence. This training can be either internal or external to the forensic science laboratory. Some commonly used approaches to continuing education are instructor led, professional conferences/seminars, distributed learning, apprenticeship, residency, internship, teaching, and presentations by trainee/employee, workshops, short courses, web-based instruction, and independent classes.

Forensic science is a continuously developing field, yet continuing education is not a requirement to the field as a whole. Certifying bodies within the forensic science community may require continuing education for certification and recertification. The quality of continuing education for the forensic scientist should follow specified minimum requirements and be consistent with recognized, peer-defined standards that are set by specific accrediting bodies or forensic disciplines (e.g., ASCLD/Laboratory Accreditation Board, Scientific Working Groups, IAI, and ABC).

Training and continuing education was identified as a significant area of need within the forensic science community in several studies including National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) *Forensic Sciences: Review of Status and Needs* (1999), TWGED's *Education and Training in Forensic Science: A Guide for Forensic Science Laboratories, Educational Institutions, and Students* (2004), and the 180-day Study Report: *Status and Needs of United States Crime Laboratories* (2004). The release of the 2009 National Academy of Sciences Report (NAS), *Strengthening Forensic Science in the United States: A Path Forward*, also addressed the issue of continuing education for all working forensic scientists. The NAS report states that continuing education is "critical for all personnel working in crime laboratories as well as those in other forensic science disciplines..." The report also addresses that the quality of continuing education is an issue and regardless of the discipline, there are core elements that need to be followed. These elements include the following: standards of conduct (ethics training); safety (biological, chemical, physical hazards); policy (SOP's, quality assurance, accreditation); legal (expert testimony, rules of evidence, court procedures); evidence handling (recognition, collection, and preservation of evidence); and communication (written, verbal, and nonverbal communication skills). The discipline-specific elements should include history of discipline, relevant literature, methodologies, instrumentation, statistics, and testimony; plus an assessment of knowledge is needed to measure the performance of the practitioner.

Many opportunities for quality continuing education are available but the lack of financial support from the agency or crime laboratory can hinder the forensic scientist from taking advantage of this training. Funding for training is an issue with most agencies' diminishing budgets. The recommended budget for training is 1-3% of the total laboratory budget, which on average is \$1.3 million for publicly funded crime labs. Some labs have allotted \$1,000-\$1,500 per year for each person for training or continuing education. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), *Census of Publicly Funded Forensic Crime Laboratories* (2002), the budget for training is less than 1% of the overall laboratory budgets. Even when laboratories have the funding for training, they lack the personnel to cover the person who is away for training. A few agencies see training as a reward to the scientist and not a need to continue his or her professional development. Worse, some view training as an opportunity for the employee to travel and have fun, not to improve their skills. However, continuing education for practitioners strengthens the agency and the field as a whole.

Continuing Education, Training, NAS Report