D16 The Hart House Report: A Multidisciplinary Discussion of Forensic Science in Canada

Michael S. Pollanen, MD, Ontario Forensic Pathology Service, Centre for Forensic Science and Medicine, 26 Grenville St., Toronto, ON M7A 2G9, CANADA; Kathy L. Gruspier, PhD, JD, Ontario Forensic Pathology Service, Centre for Forensic Science and Medicine, 26 Grenville St, Toronto, ON M7A 2G9, CANADA; Matthew J. Bowes, MD, Nova Scotia Medical Examiner Service, 5670 Spring Garden Rd, Ste 701, Halifax, NS B3M 4T5, CANADA; and Sherah L. Van Laerhoven, PhD, Univ of Windsor, Dept of Biology, 401 Sunset Ave, Rm 119, Windsor, ON N9B 3P4, CANADA*

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the issues facing forensic science in Canada and will hear recommendations for improving deficiencies and evolving the science not only in Canada, but in local jurisdictions around the world where the legal system is questioning the reliability of forensic science.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing a road map for forensic scientists in Canada and other jurisdictions to create and share advances in forensic science among academic and government practitioners. Forensic science must evolve to meet the questions and needs of the legal community on the reliability of forensic science and this presentation will offer some suggestions on how to accomplish that goal.

Over two days in May 2012, a group of forensic scientists and practitioners representing ten main disciplines within forensic science met at the University of Toronto, in a meeting sponsored by the Centre for Forensic Science and Medicine at the University of Toronto. The forensic scientists who participated were drawn from both the academic and public sectors and included the participation of a judge from the Ontario Court of Appeals.

A number of wrongful convictions and subsequent public inquiries in Canada have raised the question of reliability of forensic science in both the scientific and legal communities. This meeting was convened as an initial response to the question of reliability. There are three major trends driving change to forensic science in Canada:

1. A shift to an evidence-based paradigm, paralleling that in medicine.
2. Recognition among forensic science practitioners of the need to bridge the gap between expectations and deliverables in the presentation of expert opinion evidence.
3. The publication of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences Report.

The goals and objectives of the meeting were to:

1. Provide a description of the current state of forensic science in Canada.
2. Provide a summary of the major challenges and opportunities facing forensic science in Canada.
3. Provide recommendations on how to strengthen and develop forensic science in Canada.

Although the areas of forensic practice represented at the meeting were seemingly diverse (e.g., forensic nursing, forensic physical sciences, forensic psychiatry, amongst others), the group identified common deficiencies and adopted similar recommendations for the development and evolution of forensic science in Canada.

In the area of forensic science research, it was agreed that the ties between forensic science service providers (mostly government agencies) and universities had to be strengthened, with strategic and sustainable research programs being developed. In addition, it was agreed that national granting agencies should recognize forensic science as a discipline and apportion research funding accordingly. It was recognized that forensic science education and training would benefit from a more multidisciplinary approach and that graduate and postgraduate training should be developed and/or supported. Continuing education in best practices is necessary and this important aspect of forensic science needs to be developed more fully. In order to do this, scientific working groups and their guidelines, professional certification and accreditation and recognizing the importance of ethics, professionalism and bias will need to be instilled in practitioners. An in-depth discussion of the administration and regulation required to do this was also undertaken.

The meeting concluded by recognizing that forensic science is an integrative, multi-disciplinary science with its own theoretical basis requiring scientific inquiry. In order for forensic science to strengthen its progress in Canada, it is vital that all areas embrace the full cycle of service, teaching, and research. While the group recognized that the discussion was only introductory, a substantive document was produced which should assist in addressing these deficiencies and attaining these goals. The document does not recommend the creation of new agencies, nor does it advocate for specific systemic reforms, rather it is offered as a tool to engage stakeholders and encourage further dialog so that forensic science can continue to evolve, grow, and meet the needs of the legal system.

Forensic Science, Canada, Reliability

 ** Presenting Author*