E13 Error Reporting: Replacing Blame With Solutions

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the concepts of non-punitive error reporting systems and the possible obstacles to implementing such systems in forensic science facilities.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by initiating a discussion of error reporting and the need to consider non-punitive error reporting systems to improve data collection.

"Error" — a five-letter word that provokes heated discussions in the forensic science community. Attempting to address "error" in the forensic sciences frequently leads to ideological arguments that divide our communities and result in accusations of information withholding, bias, and injustice. Even defining "error" can lead to accusations of bias. Narrow definitions of error, to support declarations that forensic science methods produce no "error," seem evasive and at times delusional. Broad definitions of error, to encompass all non-intentional or non-deliberate results, seem to condemn forensic science as faulty, incompetent, and unprofessional.

For all the accusations, heated arguments, and ideological divisions; however, we are a community united in our intentions — we strive to perform good science and to get correct results. We want to remove "error" from our methods and our analyses. Yet, error occurs. Humans make mistakes. No system is perfect. Call them mistakes, errors, unintended consequences, or whatever euphemism is preferred, they occur. The relevant question is not what to call them, but how to avoid them.

In many professional fields, the trend has been towards non-fault or non-punitive error reporting to maximize data collection on errors. These fields include aviation, air traffic control, and various medical services. The stated goal in those fields has been to promote a "culture of safety" that seeks to increase reporting to prevent recurrences of errors and to generate information that could expose graver dangers (with more consequential effects). The systems rely on a commitment to shield reporters from any adverse or punitive consequences for both reporting the mistakes and making the mistakes. The systems apply to unintentional errors only; intentional errors can still lead to adverse consequences. Safety advocates have long touted the benefits of non-punitive systems to increase information that will lead to systematic improvements in procedures and the overall quality of services.

With the provision of forensic science services, maximizing the information about errors would seem to be a worthwhile endeavor. Learning from mistakes, improving operational procedures, and preventing scientific "disasters" are common, uncontroversial goals. But is implementing non-punitive reporting systems the right step for forensic science facilities and can a non-punitive reporting system function when forensic science services are provided for the adversarial legal system?

This presentation will discuss the features of non-punitive error reporting systems and whether the "culture of safety" dynamic supporting such systems in other fields can be transformed into a "culture of science" dynamic to support the systems in the forensic science community. The obstacles to using the non-punitive systems (which stress solutions) where results are introduced in legal proceedings (which are geared toward assigning blame) will also be discussed.

Error Reporting, Non-Punitive Systems, Culture of Science

 ** Presenting Author*