



Criminalistics Section - 2015

B113 The Hunt for Aaron Bassler: A Multidisciplinary Criminalistics Case Study Incorporating Proper Crime Scene Evidence Collection, DNA, Officer-Involved Shooting, and Firearms Comparison

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand a criminalistic's case study that encompasses crime scene response, proper crime scene evidence collection, DNA, and firearms comparison.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by reviewing a comprehensive criminalistics case that explores the inter-relationship between client agency investigations and the criminalistics laboratory.

On August 11, 2011, a gunshot homicide victim was found in a remote forest area of Mendocino County, CA, by the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office. The unknown suspect had defecated at the scene and the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office believed this to have good evidentiary value for a DNA and Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) search. Detectives from Mendocino County Sheriff's Office contacted a senior criminalist at the California Department of Justice Eureka Laboratory regarding submission of feces evidence left at a crime scene. The detectives were advised that the sample was inappropriate for DNA analysis. After determining there was no firearm evidence left at the scene, they were advised to return to the scene to look for a more appropriate sample such as a bottle, can, partially eaten food, or cigarette butt. Mendocino County Sheriff's Office personnel returned to the scene and collected a tinfoil marijuana joint.

On August 27, 2011, a second gunshot homicide victim was located in a remote forest area near the town of Fort Bragg, CA, also in Mendocino County. A witness to this shooting helped Mendocino County detectives identify Aaron Bassler as a possible suspect. Due to the apparent type of weapon used, the wilderness location of the homicide, and familiarity with the suspect, the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office detectives believed that Aaron Bassler was the suspect for both homicides. Another senior criminalist at the California Department of Justice Eureka Laboratory was called in to assist in processing the scene of the second gunshot victim. Among the items collected at the scene was a tinfoil marijuana joint. The first senior criminalist collected swabs from the marijuana joints at each scene and submitted the swabs to the California Department of Justice Redding Laboratory for DNA analysis. Due to the fact that the suspect had not been apprehended, a reference bloodstain was made from a blood sample from Aaron Bassler's previous Driving Under the Influence (DUI) submission. The DNA profiles from the evidence from both scenes were the same as Aaron Bassler's.

Two homicide victims in a small, rural county caused great concern for the citizens of Mendocino County. The Mendocino County Sheriff issued multiple press release statements declaring that apprehending the suspect was a top priority. A five-week manhunt ensued that involved Special Weapons And Tactics (SWAT) teams from Mendocino County, Humboldt County, Napa County, Sacramento County, and Alameda County as well as United States Federal Marshals, numerous search and rescue teams, and K-9 units. The suspect was able to elude the agents at length due to his familiarity with the remote surroundings, the very difficult terrain, and his survivalist mentality. At one point during the manhunt, Bassler was observed by an Alameda County SWAT officer and gunfire was exchanged. After he had fled the area, fired cartridge cases were collected from the rifle used by Bassler during this incident.

The manhunt finally came to a conclusion when Sacramento County SWAT officers shot and killed Bassler. The weapons from the officers involved in the fatal shooting of Bassler as well as Bassler's rifle were submitted to the first senior criminalist for comparison to the fired cartridge cases from the second homicide scene and both officer-involved shootings. The cartridge cases were most likely fired from Bassler's rifle.

Crime Scene, DNA, Firearms Comparison