W12 Development of a Reasonable Minimum Documentation Standard for Latent Prints

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have: (1) hands-on experience in the difficulties of creating a one-size-fits-all policy for assigning documentation requirements to latent print evidence based upon the difficulty of the image; (2) experiential first-hand knowledge of some of the key attributes that factor into latent difficulty classifications; and, (3) a better understanding of the arguments for enhanced documentation as well as some practical suggestions on how to implement such a policy and the tools to design a policy that conforms to their own agency's operational needs.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by furthering the dialogue surrounding the need for and implementation of realistic documentation policies while providing attendees with the practical tools and advice necessary to successfully craft and implement needed minimum documentation standards for latent print comparison work policies in their own laboratories.

Critics, courts, and researchers alike have been clamoring for increased documentation requirements for latent print comparison work. Accreditation standards support it and good scientific practice requires it, yet surprisingly few forensic laboratories even have a minimum documentation policy. Typically, the amount of documentation performed is either minimal in the extreme or is left entirely to the discretion of the individual examiner.

It seems that many laboratories incorrectly assume that taking the time to document will encompass a large volume of additional work without any measurable benefit, while it also seems to be that laboratories simply don't know how to accomplish designing and implementing such a policy. Part of the problem is that a sensible documentation policy should be predicated on the difficulty of the images in question — easy latents should require very little documentation, while more difficult latents should be subject to enhanced documentation. But as there are no generally accepted criteria for defining complex prints, it becomes difficult to determine when to apply these different policies.

This presentation will begin with a lecture on the philosophy of documentation — why do we document? Who are we doing it for? What makes it good scientific practice? Next will be exercises looking at actual latent prints and making quick, gut-reaction determinations about the quality of each image. Each image will be sorted into one of three categories based on perceived quality level and consensus among participants will be undertaken on these determinations.

Following the first exercise, the attributes of a latent image that make it more or less difficult will be discussed, and some visual training on what each attribute looks like will be reviewed in order to minimize variability between analysts in interpreting the criteria.

In a second exercise, participants will grade a set of latents according to the attributes that each displays. The results of this exercise will be reviewed as a group, once again determining what type of consistency can be reached among the participants.

Once the exercises are complete, the presentation will return to philosophy, with participants engaging in a roundtable discussion to identify useful features of a documentation policy and what are seen as the potential challenges to implementation.

Finally, suggestions will be offered for policies that could be implemented that will fulfill the goals of documentation, while having as small an impact on operations as possible.

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Forensic Technology Center of Excellence (FTCoE) is committed to improving the practice of forensic science and strengthening its impact to agencies dedicated to combating crime. This FTCoE workshop recognizes the importance of balancing the implementation of best practices with recognizing the operational needs of a functional forensic science laboratory.

Documentation, Latent Prints, SOPs

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