More Reliable and Efficient Trace Evidence through a Stronger Forensic Science Culture

Claude Roux
UTS Centre for Forensic Science
claude.roux@uts.edu.au
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- Forensic Science on Trial:
  - Foundations of forensic science
  - Reflections on NAS report
  - Professionalization of forensic science
  - Effectiveness of forensic science
  - Contextual bias

- Emerging common theme:
  - Forensic science must take ownership of its own discipline!
The Problem is more fundamental than a deficient system to fix by normative procedures

- Apparent lack of unifying paradigm
- Roles badly understood
- Object of study de-focused
- Needs often misidentified

"I suppose the only way we could find out exactly who collected these DNA samples would be to fingerprint everyone."
Definition Issue

• Wikipedia definition for Analytical Chemistry:
  – Analytical chemistry is the study of the separation, identification, and quantification of the chemical components of natural and artificial materials. Qualitative analysis gives an indication of the identity of the chemical species in the sample and quantitative analysis determines the amount of one or more of these components. The separation of components is often performed prior to analysis.
Definition Issue

• Wikipedia definition for Forensic Science:
  – Forensic science (often shortened to forensics) is the application of a broad spectrum of sciences to answer questions of interest to a legal system. This may be in relation to a crime or a civil action. The word forensic comes from the Latin adjective forensis, meaning "of or before the forum."

• Compared to analytical chemistry, the definition is somewhat vague...
Back to the Future

• Old case study (16 years approx.):  
• Sexual assault in Switzerland:  
  – Suspect's thumb and index finger were swabbed in order to detect biological evidence.  
  – The suspect confessed his sexual crime.  
  – Witness deposition - The suspect could have fired a gun and attempted to kill the victim.
## Analysis

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“Near Missed”

- ???????????????????????????

Well established analytical method + Known limits of detection, uncertainties, standards, etc. + Interpretation relying on research = Potential miscarriage of justice
The Lessons

- Situation and context take precedence over lab processes.
- The uncertainty is primarily related to the situation caused by the crime itself and by the actions at the crime scene, and rarely from the analytical methods.
- Most discussions in recent years focused on laboratory processes and error rate in methods...
The Lessons

• We got it right because:
  – Ability of two forensic scientists to discuss the case freely and integrate relevant contextual information to assess objective observations against various hypotheses.
  – A lot of discussion in recent years focused on shielding forensic scientists from any contextual information otherwise their approach and judgment may be biased…

• This is forensic science (as opposed to analytical chemistry in this case)!
THE Trace – Back to Basics

- Fundamental piece of information about the crime itself.
- Generally unwilling, incomplete, or at least not representative in the statistical sense;
- Cannot be reproduced in the scientific sense;
- Must be detected, sometimes imagined, amongst a heavy noise;
- Objective and present, while containing information about the past;
- When absent, it has an effect on the investigation – but difficult to measure this.
Four Dimensions of Forensic Science


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Implications

Tools and their level of sophistication must be different

- Intelligence
  - Crime analysis
  - Security issues

- Investigation
  - Identification
  - Localisation

- Structuring Evidence
  - Crime detection

- Court
  - Trial

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The Reality in Trace Evidence

• Potentially self destructing by creating an overhead-draining high-tech environment and increasingly complex normative processes regardless of the dimension it is being used and without a concomitant assessment with regards to the justice and security questions we are supposed to solve!
Where to from here?

• Normative procedures, by themselves, will not address the fundamental criticisms.

• Efficiency of forensic science, and especially trace evidence, and its value to investigators and victims should be better captured.

• Expanding role in other dimensions than Court.
Where to from here?

- Paramount to develop and foster a forensic science culture with crime and its traces as the central object.
  - “Until we go back to these fundamental and basic issues, forensic science will remain in the firing line dictated by others.” [Margot, P., Forensic science on trial - What is the law of the land?, Australian Journal of Forensic Sciences, 2011, 43:2-3, 89-103]
  - Major role for education and training, fed by research and casework experience.
Selected Recent References

• Delémont O. et al., La violence laisse des traces : l’homicide dévoilé par la science forensique In Traité des violences criminelles, Cusson M. et al. (Eds.), Les Presses de l’Université de Montréal, In press.
• Margot P., Commentary on The Need for a Research Culture in the Forensic Sciences, 2011, 58 UCLA L. Rev. 795.
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21st International Symposium on the Forensic Sciences
Convicts to Criminalistics: Past, Present and Future

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