



**AMERICAN SOCIETY
OF
CRIME LABORATORY DIRECTORS, INC.**

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ASCLD STATEMENT

Reviewing Historical Practices of Forensic Science Laboratories

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Background:

Recently the Attorney General of North Carolina initiated an independent review of the State Bureau of Investigation Crime Laboratory (SBICL). The report is titled “An Independent Review of the SBI Forensic Laboratory” and will hereafter be referred to as the “Report” in this statement. This Report focused on policies, procedure and practices of the laboratory’s Forensic Biology Section between January 1987 and January 2003.

Although ASCLD has reviewed the Executive Summary and details contained within the report, it is not the intent of ASCLD to critique the validity of the Report or the conclusions reached.

ASCLD used the published Report as an opportunity to comment regarding the caution that must be taken in reviewing historical activities of forensic science laboratories.

Review of Historical Activities of Forensic Laboratories

Care must be taken reviewing the historical practices of forensic laboratories while looking through the lens of a 2010 quality system and analytical practices. The Report reviewed reporting practices of the SBICL between 1987 and 2003 and was critical of those practices during that time frame.

The forensic science community has developed quality assurance standards to examine, review and improve the quality of work performed within laboratories offering forensic services. These standards are continually updated and improved and have become increasingly more stringent over the years, ensuring robust quality systems in forensic laboratories.

Through conscious, ongoing efforts the reporting requirements for ASCLD/LAB accredited forensic science laboratories have evolved to become more specific and rigorous. For example, in 1993, the ASCLD/LAB standard for reporting was:

“Conclusions reported must fall within the range of acceptable opinions of knowledgeable individuals in the field of forensic science or be supported by sufficient scientific data.”

In 2010, the ASCLD/LAB standard for reporting is:

“Written reports must be generated for all analytical work performed on evidence by the laboratory and must contain the conclusions and opinions that address the purpose for which the analytical work was undertaken. The significance of associations made must be communicated clearly and qualified properly. The name of the author(s) must appear in the report.”

In order to review the historical work and practices of a forensic laboratory, one must perform the review in light of accepted standards at the time the work was performed.

Forensic Results and Conclusions in the Courtroom

In addition, it must be understood that crime laboratories and the testing conducted are just one part of a complex criminal justice process. Scientific testimony can be an important factor in the judicial resolution of civil and criminal cases; therefore forensic results must be utilized responsibly and appropriately. It is essential that all members of the criminal justice system (i.e. judge, prosecutor and defense attorney) ensure that case documentation is available and reviewable and that the forensic expert is testifying to the results obtained.

Law enforcement officers, attorneys, and the courts also have a responsibility to engage the forensic scientist(s) responsible for the report in order to understand the meaning of the language contained within the report. Communication between all parts of the criminal justice system is essential to ensure that forensic laboratory reports are not misinterpreted or the information they contain misused.

In order for the criminal justice system to be effective, everyone involved must be held accountable and fulfill their respective obligations.

Summary

The field of forensic science, both in terms of technology and the stringency in which our quality standards evolve, is constantly changing. This evolution is brought about by the experience of the past which makes our entire quality system more robust. This constant improvement in forensic science makes it imperative that prosecutors and defense attorneys meet with forensic experts and understand the limitations of the science and the conclusions that can be drawn.

Greg Matheson, President
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