

James T. Weston, M.D.
President, American Academy of Forensic Sciences

GUEST EDITORIAL

The Course of Forensic Sciences

Recently a close friend, a scientist, asked that I gaze into my idealistic crystal ball in an effort to discern the course of the forensic sciences in the next several decades. This was done with considerable personal humility, and this slightly hazy interpretation of its rendition is presented.

The scene shifts; it is the late 19__s; the exact year is not important. Two very elderly forensic scientists, one physical, the second biological, are returning from a teaching assignment on the campus shared by their "institute." The class, an introductory university offering, is designed to acquaint new students with the machinations of science, increasingly changing, and the law, also changing, but much more slowly. The students, prospective "aides," or perhaps a more descriptive term in our present vernacular, apprentices, are pursuing careers which will ultimately place them as knowledgeable intermediaries between the source of any evidence which might be scientifically examined and the services of the university-related "institute," typical of many in the country wherein most of the disciplines in the behavioral, physical, and biological

sciences are represented at the working level. These "aides" arrived on the forensic scene in the early 1970s when the "greats" among the forensic scientists of their day, sitting within the shining glass and steel of the very first "institutes" became aware that no matter how skilled their staff or how faultless their instrumentation or methods, if the evidence was not gathered correctly or if it was missed altogether, their task was meaningless; their empire founded upon sand.

It was in this same period that the leaders in the many disciplines now represented at the bench became aware of a need for standards of excellence which were universally accepted, straightforward, and, most importantly, kept abreast of their counterparts in the forefront of their disciplines, hence the "institute," an innovation borrowed from nineteenth century Europe wherein the workers in the field could be associated with the innovators or even the dreamers within their chosen profession.

Regular rotation of the scientists close to the action, who are providing the know-how to the "aides" engaged in field training, back into the "institute" provides them with an opportunity to share newly identified problems. With similar colleagues, these problems may be collectively addressed, thus possibly providing solutions. Hence the concept of enrichment of professional service activity of those in the disciplines by readily definable educational responsibilities and research opportunities, addressing "real" problems.

The individual egos commenced to be satisfied by measurable professional accomplishment and recognition, leading quite naturally to increased consultation within a discipline, and, where desirable, across hitherto imaginary disciplinary boundaries. Interdisciplinary rivalry diminished to a healthy perspective upon realization that cooperation was an absolute necessity and no one group could any longer even approach keeping abreast of more than one area of expertise.

Sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s it became apparent to many workers in these fields that much of their knowledge and most of their instruments could be brought to bear on their greatest concern, the environment. The resulting correlation of the impact of all nature of environmental agents was immediately made available to those regulatory agencies charged with the responsibility for the people's welfare. Soon thereafter many of our "institutes" were renamed to reflect these added interests and responsibilities.

Well, you ask, as I might have of the professors, "who was paying for this?" Public and private interests alike have recognized the value of a single cadre of unbiased specialists whose resources are equally available to both parties in criminal or civil actions. The cost of the service is therefore shared. Such expertise, however, is never denied any party because its cost is beyond their means.

"Well," my friend acknowledged, "you are a dreamer! Those Utopian concepts are many years further down the road than revealed."

To which my reply was, "Several of them are already happening. The first leaders of our group, many years ago, conceived many of these precepts."

What do you think?