

GUEST EDITORIAL



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Justice in the Forensic Sciences

The struggle of today is not altogether for today—it is for a vast future also. (Lincoln, 1861)

Many historical references to the origins of forensic science, even to ancient times, exist in the vast literature of humanity. It was not, however, until Sir Arthur Conan Doyle with intriguing foreshadowing suggested the use of scientific crime detection methods, through his fictional character Sherlock Holmes, that modern forensic science began its development. Holmes applied principles of serology, fingerprinting, firearm identification, and questioned document examination long before these techniques and their utilization were to be recognized and accepted in modern investigation. Marsh in 1832 isolated arsenic to demonstrate the actual presence of a toxic substance, and displayed this before a jury. Bertillon initiated a system of anthropometric measurements for personal identification which was adopted by the Paris police in 1882. The English coroner, originally established to insure that the King received his share, later extended his duties to the investigation of death, and in America, the first medical death investigation system was established in New York in 1918. These and many other developments continued to merge and move forward until R. B. H. Gradwohl in 1948 called a meeting in St. Louis of forensic medicine and sciences which led to the first meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, 26–29 Jan. 1950. Among the stated purposes of this pioneering group of approximately 150 members was to raise the standards of investigation techniques and the quality of testimony in the courts and engender the confidence and respect of the judiciary, specifically to create and foster confidence by the courts in scientific and legal proof, and to raise the standard of reliability in investigation and testimony of men who do this work. At that time, sections existed in forensic pathology, forensic psychiatry, forensic toxicology, forensic immunology, jurisprudence, police science, and questioned documents. The Academy has subsequently grown and with it the struggle to recognize the expertise provided by the increasing number of forensic science disciplines. Overcoming much turmoil and controversy, the Academy today is supported by 2700 members representing an expansion of sections including Criminalistics, Engineering, General, Jurisprudence, Odontology, Pathology and Biology, Physical Anthropology, Psychiatry, Questioned Documents, and Toxicology. The image of the forensic scientist was recently boosted by the media when the television show “Quincy” removed the dull fog of night and replaced it with a symbol of service and dedication. In recent years, we have come together, replaced divisiveness with unity, and put our best foot forward. Some recent events threaten to compromise these gains. We read of forensic scientists challenging one another even in areas where the issues do not appear substantial or timely. If one of us loses, we all lose. This is a time, I believe, for forensic scientists to rethink the lessons of the past, to remember the purposes of the original 150, for it is in doing so that our future will be preserved and that justice in the forensic sciences will be insured.