

GUEST EDITORIAL



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The Essential Commitment for a Forensic Scientist

Forensic scientists have a unique and essential role in the criminal and civil justice system. They examine physical evidence associated with an event or situation, develop and report facts associated with the evidence, and provide expert opinion regarding their observations. The facts and opinions, in and of themselves, do not establish the guilt or innocence of someone suspected of wrongdoing; however, they may be the primary information available to allow a conclusion of guilt or innocence to be drawn. The impact of the forensic scientist's conclusions affords no room for error, because such errors may be the direct cause of an injustice.

Forensic scientists must assure themselves that the results they are providing are completely accurate. Working in an environment where quality assurance is not just a term, but is a reality, is essential to providing confidence in accuracy to the scientist.

Among the stated objectives of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences is to improve the practice, elevate the standards, and advance the cause of the forensic sciences. The Academy has effectively been accomplishing this objective by actively sponsoring programs such as certification. The technical disciplines of Anthropology, Document Examination, Odontology, Pathology, Psychiatry, and Toxicology have all developed certifying bodies under Academy sponsorship, and have demonstrated leadership in elevating professionalism within the forensic sciences. The Academy has not been alone as an organization in this movement to improve the practice and elevate the standards of the forensic sciences. The American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors has developed a Crime Laboratory Accreditation program, and a significant number of laboratories have undergone the accreditation process. These laboratories have also demonstrated leadership qualities in elevating professionalism within forensic sciences. Other organizations have made important contributions to advancing the cause of professionalism as well. Clearly, the professional organizations and some employing agencies have not only recognized the importance of quality assurance, but have taken leadership roles in making it a reality.

The described activities are important; however, they must be supported by a personal commitment by every forensic scientist. Each individual must maintain a constant awareness of the nature of their work, and commit themselves to operating at the level of professionalism that enables them to accomplish their mission. High work load and other pressures may at times exert influence on the forensic scientist to reach conclusions with facts or data that do not eliminate all reasonable doubt. It is the responsibility of every forensic scientist to maintain technical competence, render technically correct statements, avoid misleading or inaccurate claims, and assure correct interpretation. Our organizations, professional and employing, have developed an environment that emphasizes quality; it is up to the forensic scientist to assure that quality is a reality.

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