

Guest Editorial

Michael A. Peat, Ph.D.

Next year will be the fiftieth anniversary of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. This is as a time to reflect on past achievements and on future challenges. I cannot believe that when our founding fathers gathered in 1948, they understood the significance of the Academy's birth and the role it would take in advancing the science in forensic science. For the last fifty years forensic scientists of all disciplines have considered AAFS to be their professional home. They have labored to adapt technology developed for other purposes to the forensic sciences, and in doing so may have only received recognition from their peers in the Academy.

Our founding fathers are today recognized as leaders in their fields, not only for their advancement of the profession but also for their mentoring of the next generation of forensic scientists. We can all probably trace our roots back to one of these earlier generations, many of whom are still among the most active of the profession. We would be remiss if we did not recognize those founding fathers who are still with us today. I would personally like to thank them for their contributions to the field, and for being present at the birth of the Academy. Listed below are these individuals:

Robert V. Blanke, Ph.D.
 Frank P. Cleveland, M.D.
 Kurt M. Dubowski, Ph.D.
 Robert M. Forney, Ph.D.
 Lauren J. Goin, M.S.
 Leo R. Goldbaum, Ph.D.
 Ordway Hilton, M.A.
 Fred E. Inbau, LL.M.
 Sidney Kaye, Ph.D.
 Edgar Kivela, Ph.D.

The last two decades have seen mind numbing advancements in technology, the growth of a PC oriented society, and the explosion of molecular biology are only two examples. What have these advancements meant for the forensic sciences? It is obvious that without the developments in molecular biology there would be no "DNA fingerprinting," an area where the profession has experienced the most dramatic growth in the last decade. It is also becoming increasingly obvious that advancing technology is not the answer to all of our problems. We may now be, and in some cases have been for some while, at the point where the technology defeats our ability to interpret the results of the tests or that these results can mislead the investigators. For example, during the investigation of TWA Flight 800 traces of explosive were found around some passenger seats near what was suspected to be the site of the explosion. It was subsequently determined that the aircraft had been used for training and testing sniffer dogs. No one should take this example and draw the conclusion that we do not need the technology, what we often need is a more cautious and considered interpretation of technology.



I believe this growth in technology has had a second and potentially more important impact. We have far exceeded the ability of a jury or a court to understand forensic science evidence. A recent book on the Menendez trial by one of the jurors (1) should be required reading for anybody interested in today's trial system. Although the author does not discuss the scientific evidence in detail, she refers to one of the scientific witnesses as "just as geeky and fidgety as can be." These are hardly words of confidence in the testimony provided by this witness, but it is interesting to note that it was not his testimony which she remembered. Presentation of scientific evidence continues to receive scrutiny from the legal profession. What is readily apparent is that juries are increasingly making a determination on the credibility of a forensic scientist's evidence, not on scientific fact but on how it is presented.

Together with this technology explosion there has been considerable growth in the membership of the Academy. Today there are over 4000 members, of whom 290 are from outside the United States. This compares to 3435 members (of whom 161 were from outside the US) only five years ago and 2677 (of whom 130 were from outside the US) ten years ago. Another sign of the Academy's growth has been the increase in numbers attending the annual scientific meeting. Each year is a record year!

One of the changes that has occurred in the Academy over the years has been the disparate growth of the various sections. Today

three sections (Criminalistics, Pathology/Biology, and Toxicology) have 59% of the membership. This potentially has significant impact on the operations of the Academy if one (or more) of these sections decided to exert its "political clout." Each of these disciplines has formed its own professional organizations, for example, the National Association of Medical Examiners and the Society of Forensic Toxicologists. One of the major challenges facing the Academy is to remain the premier professional body. Already some of our members consider these other bodies to be their primary professional organization. A second challenge facing the Academy is the growth in regional organizations, such as the California Association of Criminalists and the Northwestern Association of Forensic Scientists. Attendance at these meetings is growing, and one of the reasons for this is the increasing expense of attending the annual Academy meeting.

During his term as President of the Academy, Dr. Richard Froede established a Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) to examine some of these issues. This Committee published (2) its recommendations in 1994 and President Steven Batterman appointed four task forces to evaluate the recommendations and, if feasible, to develop implementation plans. The SPC recognized that certification of forensic scientists was a key area of concern and one where the Academy should take a proactive role. It already serves as the administrative umbrella for a number of the certification bodies that were developed in the 1970s using National Institute of Justice funding. The SPC was concerned that various non-professional organizations might, at least in the public's eye, usurp this certification process by offering "supposed certification" services for a fee. The SPC was of the opinion that the Academy should develop

protocols for "certifying" the certifying bodies. This could allow the organization to become the one to turn to for information on certification in the forensic sciences. I, for one, feel very strongly that AAFS should not only fill this role, but should also work towards becoming the primary point of contact for all inquiries concerning the forensic sciences.

What impact would this have on the Academy? Over the past fifty years we have grown into an organization that services its members primarily through providing them an annual forum for scientific presentations and discussion, and by providing each member the internationally recognized *Journal of Forensic Sciences*. These are extremely valuable services and they should not be overlooked. However, to maintain its leading role in the field, the Academy must redefine itself. The recommendations of the SPC are only the beginning. Just as the evolution to our current status has taken fifty years, the next steps in the Academy's growth will take time. We need to reevaluate many sacred cows, including our organizational structure, our management structure, our relationship with the regional organizations and other professional bodies, and most of all our reason for being. Just as our founding fathers took a step into the unknown it is time for the existing generation to step forward into the next fifty years. If we do so correctly, fifty years from now we will truly be the Worldwide Association of Forensic Sciences.

References

1. Thornton H. Hung jury: the diary of a Menendez juror. Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press. And see Thornton II, *J Forensic Sci* 1996; 41(5): 899 for a review.
2. A strategic plan for the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, May 24, 1994.