

John J. Lentini,¹ B.A.

Review of: *Forensic Science Under Siege: The Challenges of Forensic Laboratories and the Medico-Legal Investigation System*

REFERENCE: Pyrek KM. *Forensic science under siege: the challenges of forensic laboratories and the medico-legal investigation system*. Burlington, MA, San Diego, CA: Elsevier, 2007, 537 pp.

Every forensic scientist should read this book. It should be required reading in every forensic science curriculum. Reading this book will give existing and aspiring forensic scientists a clear picture of the environment in which the forensic sciences are practiced and the challenges that face the profession today.

Kelly Pyrek's 16 chapters are laid out in logical order and fairly present the views of practicing forensic scientists, their champions, and their critics. The arguments put forward by each group are presented largely in the form of direct quotations, so there is little chance that the speaker's meaning is lost or misconstrued. The list of individuals interviewed by Ms. Pyrek reads like a "Who's Who" of the forensic science, law enforcement, and legal professions.

The book begins with a definition of forensic science and an overall view of the conflicts facing both those who work in crime laboratories and those who work in medical examiner's offices. The level of detail provided is quite extraordinary. Chapter 2 describes the stakeholders in forensic science, their roles, perspectives, and expectations. Chapters 3–5 describe the U.S. forensic laboratory system, common charges that are leveled against laboratories, and the realities of working in a forensic laboratory. The major reality that echoes throughout this book is that the profession is woefully under funded.

Chapters 6–8 will be eye opening for most forensic scientists. These chapters describe the medicolegal death investigation system, i.e., the patchwork of medical examiner's offices and coroner's offices that vary from city to city and state to state. If you thought there were problems in your crime lab system, just wait until you learn about the state of the affairs in many medical examiner's offices. Again, the main problem is funding. The dead do not vote. There is a severe shortage of properly trained forensic pathologists, one reason being that pathologists can earn twice as much money working in a hospital as they can working in a morgue.

The succeeding chapters contain a philosophical discussion of the difference between science and forensic science. There is an in depth discussion of the "pattern identification" sciences. The impact of DNA typing and the subsequent Innocence Project exonerations, the *Daubert* decision, CSI, and the arguments about junk science in the courtroom are all covered in great depth and from many different points of view.

The last three chapters sing the praises of the "Champions of Forensic Science," particularly the leaders of the Consortium of Forensic Science Organizations (CFSO) and the Crime Lab Project (CLP). An agenda for reform is presented in Chapter 15, and the book ends with a chapter entitled "New Initiatives and the Future of Forensic Science." Much hope is pinned on the current National Academy of Sciences Committee on the Needs of the Forensic Science Community (<http://www.nasonline.org>), though the author is realistic about the possibility that this study will, like so many before it, be soon forgotten having produced little more than a slight superficial agitation.

Fledgling efforts by the American Judicature Society (AJS) and the Institute for the Study of Science and Law (ISSL) at Hastings College are discussed in glowing and hopeful terms, but the question remains, "Where is the money?"

It is sometimes difficult to figure out where the author stands on a particular issue, but she seems to be in favor of at least exploring the possibility of insulating laboratory analysts from domain-irrelevant information through the use of a scientist who frames the questions, but leaves the testing to other scientists who have no idea what the expected result is. Other controversial ideas include the disengagement of crime laboratories from law enforcement control, giving them the independence that characterizes many medical examiner's offices, and making forensic laboratory services available to defendants. The model of clinical laboratories reporting to the Health Department is extolled, but in the case of forensic laboratories, there is no health care system that can be taxed to fund the effort.

In several chapters, the book highlights the dilemma faced by many forensic scientists, who must decide whether their role is to help the prosecution team obtain a conviction or to help the Court find the truth. There is also a discussion of what to do when problems are brought to light, and the resistance of the forensic science community to support independent commissions to inquire into failures, even highly publicized failures.

The book starts out strong, but the reader's initial enthusiasm is likely to wane as he or she moves through this book. It is not an easy read. Although Ms. Pyrek is an editor herself, she could have benefited from the services of an editor when preparing this manuscript. The reader is likely to get a serious case of "resume fatigue," particularly when reading for the nineteenth time, "Barry A.J. Fischer, Director of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's forensic laboratory, past president of the American Academy of Forensic Science past president of the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors and past president of the International Association of Forensic Sciences notes..." (Several other oft-quoted

¹Scientific Fire Analysis, LLC, 32836 Bimini Lane, Big Pine Key, FL.

individuals suffer the same treatment.) An index of *dramatis personae* would have made the text much easier to digest. The footnoting system is repetitive and a little distracting. And toward the end, the text does tend to become repetitive. A good editor could have quickly chopped 50–100 pages off of this book with no loss of information.

Notwithstanding the stylistic problems, Ms. Pyrex has produced an accurate description of the forensic science profession as it exists today, and advances what appear to be workable if expensive solutions to the problems that we all know exist.