

THE FORENSIC SCIENCE SOCIETY

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When someone at my work said I had the opportunity to return to Oxford over my birthday weekend AND see a very interesting and fascinating set of talks from leading forensic experts and crime writers, I immediately said, "...Nahhhh, I think I'd rather be watching telly!" (joke!). This could not be further from the truth. What follows is only a summary of what was a very busy, informative and extremely enjoyable four day conference at the Oxford Hotel, Oxford.

First off, to those who do not know me, this conference was filled with quite a lot of forensic biology-related topics (DNA, blood spattering, all the cool stuff if you know what I mean!); subjects very close to my heart and interests. As a forensic biologist/drugs scientist with Forensic Alliance Ltd until October of last year, I encountered many examples of DNA and biology-orientated casework. This conference not only allowed me to find out even more about the latest thinking in the broad sphere of forensic biology to pass on to my students, but to meet up again with a whole bunch of good friends and have a few vodkas until the "wee small hours" (subtle hint, I'm not from round these parts!), especially as it was my birthday on the Saturday.

The conference began on the afternoon of the Wednesday with an address by the President of the Society (and my former boss) Dr. Angela Gallop, and Michael Parigian, President of the California Association of Criminalists. This was followed by an interesting talk from Mr. Richard Brunstrom, Chief Constable, North Wales Police on "Forensic Science & The Impaired Driver". It updated the audience on the last few years worth of work on drug-driving and the proposed increased use of US-style field impairment tests and drugs recognition training in the UK.

This was followed by what can only be described as a "no-holes barred" presentation entitled "The case of the bitten penis" from Mr. Brian Wraxall of the Serological Research Institute, California. The talk (apart from causing all males in the audience to squirm vigorously and to sigh with relief when Brian said there was no PowerPoint slide of the actual severed appendage!) highlighted the many twists and turns that can arise through the American legal system.

Alan Kershaw subsequently updated the conference on the progress of the CRFP, mentioning that such diverse, yet forensically important fields such as anthropology and scene examination would be included in the ever-increasing register of forensic practitioners.

Professor Jack Crane, State Pathologist for Northern Ireland gave, as usual, a very animated talk on the interaction with and public opinion

of the forensic pathologist. Discussion of the speculation and forensic “fantasy” often portrayed in by Silent Witness and the like proved very amusing amongst the delegates.

The last talk of the afternoon was from the distinguished crime writer, Baroness P.D. James on “Forensic Science & The Detective Story”. What followed was a fascinating talk from one of the country’s leading writers on “what makes her tick” and how she researches her novels. Baroness James also informed us what the “PD” stood for (Phyllis Dorothy if memory serves, correct me if I’m wrong!).

After a wee rest (after what seemed like a forensic investigation in itself to find my hotel room), dinner was served followed by a really funny and interesting after dinner talk from another distinguished crime writer, fellow Scot Val McDermid. The wine was free-flowing and an element of “drink pacing” had to be invoked by a few people who realised this was going to be a busy conference.

The first talk on Thursday dispelled any “early morning tiredness” with an absolutely riveting presentation from Mr. Iain McKie, former Strathclyde police officer whose daughter Shirley was tried for perjury in 1997 after fingerprint experts alleged they had found her fingerprint inside a murder house she claimed she had never been in. The case was particularly interesting for me as it was in the local press back home for a very long time and was a topic of discussion when I was doing my MSc at Strathclyde University. Mr. McKie outlined how fingerprint experts from the Scottish Criminal Records Office have for six years refused to admit that they made two erroneous identifications, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. A sobering thought was left in Mr. McKie’s final quote in his talk:

***“To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men”
(Abraham Lincoln)***

Mr. Ray Palmer from the FSS in Huntingdon (where my first forensic incarnation took place in the DNA section) gave an interesting talk on how CCTV camera footage became invaluable in apprehending the murderers of a young man in a gang-related violent assault. The discussion of blood transfer/deposition in the case highlighted the question of “inevitability of blood transfer” in such a scenario and the importance of gaining as much information on the case as possible before any interpretation is begun.

Mike Jones of Capita McClarens (Loss Adjusters) gave a fascinating talk on fire investigation, but what particularly stood out was his discussion of the use of “mediums” in one of his cases...spooky!

This talk was followed by a very detailed and interesting blood presentation from Ros Hammond, Biology Resource Manager of my old lab at Forensic Alliance in Culham, entitled “An investigation of spattered blood – impact or coughing?” The investigation centred on the possibility that innocent actions by a defendant could account for blood distribution. The resulting Q & A session from the audience provoked a heated debate from other scientists who were involved in the prosecution and defence of the case from other organisations.

After lunch (complete with book signings from PD James and Val McDermid), the creator of Inspector Morse, Colin Dexter, gave a

hilarious talk about himself and Morse. The setting of course of the meeting in Oxford made everything even more relevant and interesting. Dianne Burns from the Richmond Dept of Justice Lab in Berkeley, California, subsequently discussed the importance of not forgetting the relevance of trace evidence in an ever-growing forensic world that is becoming very accustomed to DNA evidence.

The last presentation (before the workshops) was an excellent discussion of “Fact and fiction relative to bloodstain pattern evidence” from one of the pioneers in the field, Anita Wonder, California Association of Criminalists. BPA (blood pattern analysis to all you non-bio people) has been a great interest of mine for a long time and to hear the latest updates in the field from one of its foremost people was a great privilege for me (especially when during the Q & A session the case of OJ Simpson was discussed).

Continuing the theme of blood pattern analysis, I attended the workshop later on the Thursday run by Ros Hammond and Jennie Lewis from Forensic Alliance. The experiments discussed in the talk earlier were examined by a group of us in more depth. A light hearted competition was run to see if any of us could distinguish between coughing and impact spatter on a garment. The winner received some red liquid, only this time it was a bottle of wine!

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