

GUEST EDITORIAL



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The American Academy of Forensic Sciences is a viable organization. It has an excellent office staff and a good number of dedicated and competent members who represent many disciplines in the forensic sciences. But it is also a *dynamic* organization, one that should continually improve, expand, and seek some new directions.

To do so requires answers to at least three questions.

QUESTION: "*How do we prefer to define 'forensic science'?*"

...as consisting only of those sciences that apply physical and chemical measurements to courtroom problems...

or

...as comprising all disciplines that apply a set of systematized knowledge to courtroom problems...

Cross-pollination has long been heralded as the *raison d'être* for the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. It was so when R. B. H. Gradwohl, Ralph Turner, and a handful of other forensic scientists organized the Academy in 1946. It was so when the first sections included Criminalistics, Toxicology, Pathology, Questioned Documents, Psychiatry, and Immunology. It remains so today, without Immunology as a separate section, but with the addition of forensic disciplines such as Odontology, Anthropology, and Engineering. Add to this diversity the General Section, which today houses a kaleidoscopic variety of disciplines and specialties within its membership. And Criminalistics includes firearms examiners, drug analysts, serologists, hair examiners, and a wide range of subspecialists.

There is literally no end to the number of disciplines that have become "forensic" by definition. Nor is there an end in sight to the number of present or future specialties that may become forensic. The examples are many. Computer science, space exploration, and organ transplants are merely a surface glimpse of the terms that easily bring to mind potential courtroom situations.

Not all these specialties are necessarily *hard* sciences. A toxicologist who carries out a drug screen on a worker who fell from a scaffolding cannot ignore the engineer who has input regarding the unsafe condition of the structure when he is writing a report to correlate the fall with the identification and quantitation of a particular drug. Nor can he ignore the meteorologist who has an opinion regarding the wind velocity at the time of the incident.

The toxicologist, the engineer, and the meteorologist have all rather clearly performed a forensic science function, especially if they later qualify and testify in court. They all meet the further test, if one is necessary, of a scientist who applies physical and chemical measurements to courtroom problems. Suppose, however, that an economist, an accountant or a sociologist is called to the witness stand and testifies as an expert witness. Is that person a forensic *scientist*, eligible for membership in the Academy of Forensic Sciences?

QUESTION: "*How do we restructure the Academy's section concept?*"

...limit, or even reduce, the number of sections permitted...

or

...require more joint section meetings...

or

...divide the annual meeting into a series of back-to-back one- or two-day meetings, each for a different group of sections...

If *cross-pollination* among the forensic sciences, whether the latter are defined broadly or narrowly, is the purpose for which the Academy was brought into being, why divide into sections at all? Perhaps one giant plenary session stretching across three days of time and 10 000 square feet of ballroom space, interrupted only for a business meeting, a trek through the exhibits, a luncheon, and other social events could serve the purpose. Alternatively, the present half-day plenary session, followed by two or three days of smaller group seminars, panels, and workshops on general forensic science topics, could be the annual meeting mode. The latter could be sprinkled with occasional discipline-oriented, but *general-in-nature*, sessions, much like the popular "breakfast seminars."

The Academy must face and resolve the dilemma of the section and section meeting concept. Given the present bylaws structure for their formation, the potential is high for the creation of new sections. Unfortunately, the proliferation of sections causes logistical problems for the annual meeting planners *and* for those attending the meeting.

QUESTION: "*Do we have, or can we build, a forensic science (unity of purpose) from among our often diversly oriented members?*"

...search for a beacon of unity, find it, build around it, and let it shine as an advocate of the forensic sciences for improving the quality of life...

or

...forget it! It's not there; or if it is, it will never be found. Let us be satisfied with 2000 to 3000 members, an excellent journal, and a stimulating meeting...

Should the Academy be content with (1) publishing an excellent journal, (2) organizing and staging interesting and informative annual meetings, and (3) providing other means for intracommunication among its members? Certainly, meeting the exchange-of-information objective and meeting it well is a superb doing. It serves as the paramount membership retention motivator for the overwhelming majority of the 2000 plus members. It might even be an acceptable rallying cry for a membership recruitment drive. Maybe, but not likely!

We live in a time of *individual* rights, sometimes self-proclaimed and without fundamental validity, but often quite valid. Consider the right to be an advocate, even a blatantly vocal promoter, for one's profession. Professional athletes do it increasingly at the negotiating table. Politicians do it in order to win at the polls. Lawyers do it, today even in the yellow pages!

And forensic scientists? True, we lack an easily identifiable constituency. But we do have a constituency; that is, the "criminal justice system," not to mention the largely untapped civil justice side of the fence. Some well-directed advocacy, and even lobbying, in and among our constituency(ies), as well as amid the media, could provide the platform that will make the Academy grow.

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