DNA Technology: The Future Is Now

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We stand at the dawn of an exciting new age in crime scene identification. The potential of DNA technology as an investigative tool is far greater than fingerprints, ballistics, tool marks, fiber samples and all other current forensic technology combined.

While DNA was developed as a prosecutorial tool in the United States, the United Kingdom has demonstrated the dramatic success of this technology as an investigative tool. Although DNA has been used in the United Kingdom for nearly 10 years, building a comprehensive DNA database only began in April of 1995. In only 5 years, the English have created a database of nearly 1 million profiles of suspects and convicted offenders. Using this database, over 72,000 suspects have been linked to crimes and another 10,000 cases were linked to other similar crimes, even though the suspect has not yet been identified. Over 40,000 of these matches were for burglary cases and another 15,000 for auto thefts. Law enforcement officials in the UK report evidence technicians find identifiable fingerprints at approximately 10% of their crime scenes, while DNA evidence is collected at 52% of crime scenes. Clearly, DNA evidence has value far beyond the common belief that it is useful only in homicide and sexual assault cases.

Forensic laboratories in the United Kingdom are finding approximately 2,000 matches per month, which equals the approximate number of matches in the United States since DNA technology has been in existence. Keep in mind the population in the United Kingdom is about 1/5th the size of the population in this country. Although we are the most technologically advanced country in the world, it is surprising, if not shameful, that we are not taking full advantage of technology to identify and prosecute criminals in our midst. But there are several issues impeding the use of DNA technology as an investigative tool in New Jersey, or for that matter, the country.

First, there is limited legislative authority for law enforcement to gather and use DNA profiles. Secondly, our legislature has not provided adequate funding to develop appropriate resources to conduct the testing. Thirdly, the majority of our law enforcement officers do not have the expertise to identify, gather, and preserve DNA evidence.

Law enforcement leaders must convince our legislators of the value of using this technology as an investigative tool. We must urge them to enact laws permitting us to take samples of all persons arrested so a comprehensive database can be established. In the meantime, we must take full advantage of our existing laws and take DNA samples of all those convicted offenders permissible under the law.

It is imperative to gain the support of both the public and legislature to provide adequate funding to pay for the implementation of a comprehensive DNA program in New Jersey. Such a program will more than pay for itself through crime reduction.

Our law enforcement officers need to be properly trained in the identification, collection, and preservation of DNA evidence. There is little, if any, training available to our New Jersey police departments in the use of this technology in the investigative process. It is incumbent upon police leaders to create requisite training for the members of our organizations to take full advantage of this technology.

The New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police must be a strong advocate of a comprehensive DNA program, and this issue will play a prominent role on our legislative agenda. We will need strong public support to dispel the myths proclaimed by some civil libertarians who proclaim unnecessary intrusion. The potential that exists in DNA technology to solve crimes is so overwhelming that we cannot afford to ignore this issue, and we seek the support of all of our state legislators on this most exciting and important issue.