Closure of forensic service puts justice at risk

The UK Government must ensure continuous funding for independent forensic research and development

Sir, The announcement on Dec 14 of an “orderly wind-down” of the UK Forensic Science Service (FSS) by March 2012 has been met with disbelief and dismay by the international community of fellow scientists in the field of forensic genetics. Since Sir Alec Jeffreys first introduced DNA fingerprinting in 1985, forensic DNA analysis has experienced numerous cycles of scientific and technological innovation, to attain its current status as the most recognised discipline in forensic sciences.
It is no exaggeration to say that the FSS has led each of these steps forward to advance forensic DNA-typing to the status of precision, sensitivity and power to individualise that it now commands worldwide. These advances paved the way for the introduction of national DNA databases to routinely match crime scene material to suspects with previous convictions.

Within the framework of the European DNA Profiling Group (EDNAP) and the European Network of Forensic Science Institutes (ENFSI), professional associations created with major input from the FSS, extensive collaborative testing has achieved the level of harmonisation required to exchange data among laboratories across borders, thus providing the scientific basis for the inclusion of DNA profiles in the treaty of Prüm and the legal basis for exchange of data from national DNA databases across Europe. Thus, the FSS has truly been a leader in European forensic practice as well as research.

However, it would be erroneous to ascribe the current financial situation of the FSS to inefficiencies. Instead, this is a result of a privatisation strategy in a limited market with few customers that reduces the provision of state-of-the-art forensic science to the lowest bidder. Purely commercial suppliers in such a competitive structure are forced to reduce costs to levels that cannot support the type of research, innovation and attention to case-specific needs that has characterised the commitment to service shown by the FSS.

Professional expertise cannot be maintained without continuing research and education. Scientific research always includes the risk of failure, so funding for such research cannot be generated from the income made supplying services in a competitive market. Furthermore, we are completely convinced that certain key services to the justice system cannot be provided on a purely commercial basis, as there will always be special demands for analytical methods particular to the circumstances of the case that cannot be economically offered, but have to be kept in the inventory of methods available in the quest for establishing the scientific facts in the service of justice.

Therefore, we urgently appeal for reconsideration of this decision, and, if it is not reversed, for the UK Government to ensure continuous funding for independent forensic research and development, to protect the independent structure of the national DNA database, to maintain the resources for continuing training and education that are urgently needed in our field, and to secure an impartial system for quality assurance to all providers of forensic services.

Professor Niels Morling
President, International Society for Forensic Genetics (ISFG), Copenhagen

Professor Peter Schneider
Vice-President, ISFG, Cologne
Professor Sir Alec J. Jeffreys
Leicester

Professor Sir Edwin M. Southern
Oxford

Dr Mechthild Prinz
New York (ISFG board member)

Dr Leonor Gusmao
Porto (ISFG board member)

Professor Wolfgang Mayr
Vienna (ISFG board member)

Professor Adrian Linacre
Adelaide

Professor Angel Carracedo
Santiago de Compostela

Dr Antonio Alonso
Madrid

Dr Bente Mevag
Oslo

Dr Christopher Phillips
Santiago de Compostela

Dr Denise Syndercombe Court
London

Dr Fabrice Noel
Bruxelles

Professor Francisco Corte-Real
Coimbra

Professor George Sensabaugh
Berkeley

Dr Helle Smidt Mogensen
Copenhagen

Dr Jack Ballantyne
Orlando, Florida
Dr John Butler
Gaitherburg, Maryland

Dr John Scheffer
Victoria

Dr Laurent Pene
Lyon

Dr Lindsey Welch
Glasgow

Professor Lutz Roewer
Berlin

Dr Matti Karjalainen
Vantaa

Professor Maviky Lareu
Santiago de Compostela

Professor Peter Gill
Glasgow

Professor Richard Scheithauer
Innsbruck

Dr Ricky Ansell
Linkoping

Dr SallyAnn Harbison
Auckland

Professor Thore Egeland
Oslo

Professor Vince Pascali
Rome

Professor Walter Bar
Zurich

Professor Walther Parson
Innsbruck

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