

THE  TIMES

Closure of forensic service puts justice at risk

Should state-of-the-art forensic science be determined by commercial constraints? Leon Neal/AFP/Getty Images

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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.

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