

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: THE ILLUSION OF QUALITY THROUGH ACCREDITATION

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Recent events at the DFS in Washington DC and other forensic laboratories highlight issues about the ability to ensure quality products and services under the current forensic science QA rubric. The fact that the latest issues center on forensic DNA typing, the so-called gold standard, emphasizes the need to assess the state-of-quality, the quality mechanisms that are in place, and whether the system is designed effectively to evaluate and bolster performance. The presenters, who were involved directly in these recent events, as auditors or advisors, will discuss what caused the issues to arise, describe the practices that were improperly performed, dispel misconceptions that have been proffered, and identify practices that promoted less than desired quality products. One evident problem was incorrect mixture interpretations. Although there is no standard approach for mixture interpretation, there are accepted practices within an approach. There is substantial concern within the community of incorrect methods for mixture interpretation and related statistical calculations. Discussion is necessary to perform mixture interpretation better. Uploading and time delays of CODIS searches and output diminish the value of an important investigative tool. Better documentation of the search process from search to investigator to the court room is needed to improve the use of database 'hits'. The root cause of these functional problems lies within the QA infrastructure and its failure to identify these defects. When problems arise root cause analyses are required; failure to properly evaluate often will not resolve the problem. There is a misguided reliance on accreditation as a system that guarantees reliability and certifies methodologies used by practitioners. During audits, the questions asked, combined with the self-selection of case files, may not produce the desired outcome of improved quality. Consideration should be given to final audit reports being disclosed in discovery without request, especially if there is documentation of non-conformities, even if they were remedied. Lastly, additional training and more standardized training of analysts, and even more so managers, should be sought. Topics highlighted will describe examples of mixture interpretation that were improperly performed, limitations of CODIS derived information that reduces the power of database searching, improper or lack of root cause analysis, what accreditation means, misrepresentation of the purpose of an audit, and the need for transparency to drive quality.