

FOR THE BAD GUYS, LIFE JUST GOT TOUGHER

Story by Aly Verbaan

KILLERS walk among us. In the past, shoddy police work and inadequate forensic facilities have conspired to help criminals pull off the perfect crime. But it should not be quite so easy to get away with murder these days.



Pictured above: **BALLISTIC TESTING:** Lieutenant-Colonel Keith Rance fires a pistol in the testing room. After rounds are fired safely into the contraption, it spews the bullets and cartridge cases out at one end and sucks in water as part of a self-sustaining system. Test results are then analysed in a high-tech computer room. *Pictures: MICHAEL WALKER*

Even though crime scene investigators still occasionally overlook or inadvertently taint crucial evidence, the new SAPS forensic services complex in Platteklouf has gone a long way towards putting lawbreakers behind bars.

With its glass, chrome and ultra-tight security, the R600million building resembles nothing so much as a modern Scotland Yard. Evidence – whether it be semen samples or a bloodstained knife – arrives here every day.

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Protecting the integrity of evidence is a priority. Samples and exhibits are sealed in plastic boxes and delivered to the relevant department via a secure rail network in the roof of the building.

With a staff of 444 trained personnel, and a new laboratory specialising in DNA analysis under construction, the facility is making short shrift of the backlog in forensic work.

Getting permission to tour the premises wasn't easy. And for good reason. Control forensic analyst Colonel Noko Mabala is acutely aware that criminals have a vested interest in knowing how the police do their work.

"It's imperative that nothing jeopardises a case before it comes to court."

It's white coats, masks, gloves, hairnets and shoe covers for everyone – no exceptions. And no one gets to pass through the many security doors without the fingerprint of a profiled police officer.

First stop: In the scientific analysis department we watch through one-way glass as a man is hooked up to a polygraph machine. The monitors will say whether or not he is telling the truth.



there is no shortage of sceptics who question the method's reliability as an accurate predictor of guilt, the Polygraph Inquiries of Southern Africa says positive results of between 85 and 98 percent are easily achievable with the right equipment and expertise.

Cape Town attorney William Booth says the polygraph test is "essentially just one of the tools police make use of in an investigation" and may be "helpful too when interrogating informers."

Down the corridor, Warrant Officer Lindiwe Makutu is analysing CCTV footage from a robbery. She is in a new department that focuses on image analysis. Scrutinising faces, labels, suspects' tattoos and the like, she tries to identify suspects. However, in many cases the quality of the footage is too poor to be of much use.

"Most recordings come from streets or businesses, but people tend not to invest enough in good equipment, which makes my job difficult."

Walking though the labyrinth that is the biology unit, we find Warrant Officer Hannique Human running tests on a sample known to contain semen. Within 17 seconds it turns bright purple. That's all the confirmation she needs.

Colonel Thembela Lamani, head of the biology unit, holds a BSc from the University of the Western Cape. He explains that once DNA is extracted from a sample of blood, semen, urine, hair or fibre, it is subjected to stringent scientific processes before a conclusion can be reached.

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Lamani says of the accuracy of DNA testing: “From the moment we obtain the DNA to the end of the process, we have a conclusion rate of 90 percent. But it must be borne in mind that that relates to both inclusions – inculpatory evidence – and exclusions – exculpatory evidence.” In other words, the tests can just as easily exonerate a suspect.”

Currently, the biology department receives 2 500 DNA samples a month from the Northern, Eastern and Western Cape.

Lamani is in no doubt a national database of DNA samples is a step in the right direction, allowing retrospective DNA profiling of known criminals, convicts, parolees and schedule eight suspects.



A buccal (mouth)

swab has been developed in which a simple swab is taken from the inside of the mouth. It's no more invasive than a breathalyser. Due to the exceptionally high rates of recidivism in this country, getting the DNA profiles of known criminals is a good place to start.

Driving this initiative was Cape Town lawyer Vanessa Lynch. After her father John Lynch was murdered nine years ago, she lobbied tirelessly for the DNA bill. At the time, her father's blood-stained clothes were incinerated by the hospital, and valuable evidence was either ignored or simply thrown away. Had it been retained, DNA testing may well have led to a conviction.

Lynch joined forces with murdered student Leigh Matthews's father, Rob, forming the DNA Project, and today two of the machines in the DNA section at the lab bear the names Lynch and Leigh.

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Gunshots greet our arrival in the ballistics department. Gone are the days of the old forensic facilities, where room upon room was littered with weapons and ammunition. Now everything is carefully bagged, labelled and meticulously stored.

Acting commissioner Lieutenant Colonel Keith Rance convinces a reluctant Warrant Officer Riaan Groenewald — “This is secret stuff,” he says — to let us witness a weapons test in the cutting edge ballistics testing room.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the narcotics unit is so big that it’s spread across two levels. Says Colonel Jaco Westraat, a man with a BSc in biochemistry and 28 years’ experience as a policeman: “For the first time, we have space. In Delft there wasn’t even room to train people. When we moved here we had a backlog of 26 000 cases; now it’s down to 3 000. We’re decreasing the backlog at the rate of about 1 000 a month. The unit is looking good.”

As well it should, because more than half of all narcotics confiscated in the country are in the Western Cape.

In Lieutenant Luvuyo Silwana’s lab, hundreds of kilos of cocaine is being tested for purity. The drugs, worth millions on the street, were found floating in the sea off Mossel Bay. Most days, though, Silwana is kept busy testing tik.

Westraat says 50 percent of the drugs they receive is crystal methamphetamine, and that figure is growing yearly. After tik, it’s mandrax, cocaine, heroin, LSD, and a new trend: prescription medication bought over the internet.

Forensic services is a serious facility staffed by people who are serious about putting bad guys in jail. Just don’t expect to see what goes on behind these secured doors on CSI Cape Town any time soon.

