SA police ‘clueless in forensics’

Call to fast-track SAs DNA database

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FORENSIC detection is not only the stuff of fiction, it is also crucial to solving many crimes.

But amid calls to fast-track much delayed legislation that would establish a DNA database for South Africa, there are doubts about whether SARS officers have even a basic knowledge of forensic investigation.

Claims of police interference in DNA and other forensic evidence emerged in several recent high-profile cases.

Last week, the Northern Cape High Court heard that police investigating the Griquatown family murder had misplaced a DNA sample, and that there may have been mistakes in the labelling of exhibits.

At the Oscar Pistorius bail hearing, it emerged that the investigating officer, since removed from the case, walked into the crime scene without boot covers and a prostitute from the gun was found in the toilet bowl by Pistorius’s team, not by police.

Amid an outcry over violence against women, police earlier this year admitted they were having to divert rape kits to areas where they had run out of supplies.

The DA has also claimed that a $75 million machine that processes DNA samples was going unused because police had no stock of the consumables used by the machine.

Forensic scientist Dr David Nattrass last week said that the bullet central to a case involving a shooting in Constantia had gone missing.

‘I would love to know where it is, but even if they do find it, where is the chain of evidence? We’re not getting the basics right. We’re not even getting the baby basics right,’ Nattrass said.

Police have been criticized for the slow turn-around time on DNA evidence at their labs.

Nattrass questioned why the answers on DNA found in bones discovered under a swimming pool in Joburg a year ago—bones which he believes could be linked to notorious paedophile Ger van Roon—were still outstanding.

And therefore their labs were used in the case of the Malembo 10 (activists).

The IEC announces cases from areas of conflict, or where human rights abuses are thought to have occurred. They are currently testing bone samples from a mass grave in Libya, in which South African photographer Anton Hammerl is believed to have been buried.

National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) spokesman Mxolisi Mdladla said the remains were being tested by the SAPS Victim Identification Centre, which would decide which laboratories to use.

Vanessa Lynch, who heads the DNA Project, said that extracting DNA from old bones was a difficult and specialized task, as material degraded and only mitochondrial DNA was available.

Lynch has high hopes that the DNA Bill will be a big help to police detection. The bill, which provides for the funding of DNA profiles from convoluted criminals and those arrested for schedule one offences, was to go before cabinet earlier this month, but due to administrative issues, was not listed on the agenda.

She said the bill legislation would hopefully go before the cabinet at its next sitting.

However, members of the parliamentary portfolio committee for justice have questioned whether the bill would be useful, given that many police were not getting the basics of crime scene forensics right.

‘If the police do not collect it properly, ensure it is properly labelled and the documentation properly completed when handed to different people in the system, this often affects convictions. Training and the implementation of proper procedures are crucial. The bill on its own will not solve this,’ MP Debbie Schmitter said.

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A focus on forensics is apparent in this year’s national budget.

The police reprioritized $1.5 billion to improve investigative and forensic capability over the next three years. Expenditure in these areas has grown significantly since 2009/10 as the government increased staffing and invested in forensic science technology.

In 2009/10, R580.5m was spent on forensic sciences. That is expected to increase to R1.7bn this year.

The SAPS did not respond to questions regarding their forensic work.