



LOST EVIDENCE: The main gate to Naauwhoek farm in Griquatown, where Deon and Christelle Steenkamp and their daughter, Marthella, were murdered last year. Investigating police misplaced a DNA sample. PICTURE: FOTO24



OVERLOOKED: Oscar Pistorius is accused of murdering his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp. A projectile from his gun was found in the toilet bowl by Pistorius's team, not the police. PICTURE: REUTERS



PRECIOUS SAMPLES: Nomsa Tshabalala, second from left, with relatives surrounding the presumed grave of her son, Siboniso Tshabalala, at Avalon cemetery in Soweto last week. Samples from bodies found could be sent abroad for analysis. PICTURE: AP

SA police 'clueless in forensics'

Call to fast-track SA's DNA database

BIANCA CAPAZORIO

FORENSIC detection is not only the stuff of fiction, it is actually 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 SAPS officers have even a basic knowledge of forensic investigation.

Claims of police ineptitude with 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 projectile 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 claimed that a R75 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 Klatzow last week said that the bullet central to a case involving a shooting in Constantia had gone missing. "I'd 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," Klatzow said.

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

Klatzow 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 Gert van

Rooyen – was still outstanding, and why the material was sent overseas for testing.

The remains dug up this week at the Avalon cemetery in Soweto – believed to be those of missing activists Lolo Sono and Siboniso Shabalala – might also be sent abroad.

National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) spokeswoman Bulwelwa Makeka said the remains were with the SAPS Victim Identification Centre, which would decide which laboratories to use.

Whoever did the testing, Makeka said, usually depended on the condition of the bones. In the past they had used a DNA laboratory at the University of the Western Cape, as well as Bode Technologies in the US, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team DNA laboratory in Argentina, and the International Commission for Missing Persons (ICMP) in Bosnia.

Makeka said Bode, for example, had experience in working on burnt bone



REMOVED: Former investigating officer in the Oscar Pistorius case, Hilton Botha, walked into the crime scene without boot covers. PICTURE: MASI LOSI

material "and therefore their labs were used in the case of the Mamelodi 10 (activists)".

The ICMP analyses bones 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.

Vanessa Lynch, who heads the DNA Project, said that extracting DNA from old bones was a difficult and specialised task, as material degraded and only mitochondrial DNA was available. She speculated that if bones were sent overseas, it was because they were being sent to world-renowned experts.

Lynch has high hopes that the DNA Bill will be a big help to police detection. The bill, which provides for the banking of DNA profiles from convicted 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 draft 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 Shafer said.

But Lynch says the two police forensic DNA labs are state-of-the-art, and that the DNA Bill would go hand in hand with an implementation plan "to ensure that the legislation has teeth".

She said the DNA Project had been training members of the public, such as community policing forum members,



INVESTIGATION UNDER WAY: Police tape demarcates the crime scene at the Pretoria home of Oscar Pistorius. PICTURE: REUTERS

security guards, bystanders and paramedics, not to interfere with crime scenes, and to cordon them off to preserve evidence. "Crime scene experts need specialist training, more than they are getting now, but the legislation and the implementation plan will pull all of that together."

A focus on forensics is apparent in this year's national budget. The police reprioritised R2.5 billion to improve detective 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, R593.5m was spent on forensic sciences. This is expected to increase to R1.7bn this year. The SAPS did not respond to questions regarding their forensic work.