“STRAIGHT TO JAIL” says the DNA

For this reason, Matla A Bana has taken hands with the DNA Project to train 25 commanders from the Family Violence, Child Protection and Sexual Offences (FCS) Units about the importance of DNA evidence. Many of these detectives deal with victims immediately after they have been raped or abused. The victims are therefore instrumental in providing vital information that can link a perpetrator to a crime.

During the one-day training session, hosted in celebration of the 16 Days of No Violence Against Women and Children, one detective shared his success story with DNA evidence. A mother in an informal settlement had found her toddler in the bedroom, screaming because she had been raped. She cleaned up the child’s injuries and then took her to the hospital. This detective realised that there might be no trace of evidence on the little body, so he went back to the crime scene where he found a bloodied nappy. This was handed in as evidence, and the perpetrator’s semen was found on the nappy. He was found guilty of rape and convicted because of this evidence.

Dr Renate Rebello, an expert in genealogy, explained that first responders to the crime scene have a huge responsibility to make sure that DNA evidence is contained and not contaminated. This often happens because there might be serious injuries, traumatised victims or even more than one group responding to a scene. It is of vital importance that first responders, such as armed security officers and police, work together and share information when they hand over the scene. The public can also take steps to secure evidence in a crime scene when a crime has been perpetrated against them, especially if there is a delay in police response. If the crime scene was in your house, you can cordon off the main crime scene by using chairs - be aware of physical and biological evidence and do not touch anything unnecessarily. Keep other people out of the area unless they are from the LCRC or FSL.

If you have struggled with the perpetrator, do no wash your hands or clothes. Insist on your rights and ensure that fingerprints and DNA samples are taken. Victims who have been raped should not take a shower or bath and clean up before going to the police, as this can destroy vital information.

DNA evidence is still considered fairly new technology, which has developed very fast during the last few years. Unfortunately, a big problem which experts are facing in using this kind of evidence is the fact that legislation has not been able to keep up with the fast development. In addition to training, the DNA Project therefore focussed on lobbying for new legislation. The reason for this is not just to ensure conviction of those who are guilty, but also to set innocent people free when they have been jailed wrongly. The Innocence Project in the USA is known to have secured the release of hundreds of innocent people, some of whom were on death row.

The festive season, which we recently celebrated, is usually the time of year which FCS detectives are least looking forward to, as there is an increase in child abuse cases during this time. Children are much more vulnerable during this time because they are left unprotected at home or on the streets. Increased substance abuse during this time has also been named as one of the main reasons for this increase in abuse. Hopefully, this kind of specialised training will equip FCS detectives with the tools to understand the crime scene better, leading to the conviction of more violent perpetrators, without unnecessary exposure of the victim.

Real life might not always be like the things we see on television in programmes such as CSI, but the reality is that DNA evidence can help your case, so keep on learning by watching your favourite show!