

Call for urgent action on DNA database

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JUST 20 years ago DNA analysis was only just beginning to be recognised as a viable method of solving crimes.

Today the practice is not only the preserve of forensics experts but communities who need to be aware of how DNA is collected.

This week Cape Town-based non-profit organisation DNA Project, facilitated by Business Against Crime Eastern Cape, conducted a two-day crime scene awareness workshop in Nelson Mandela Bay.

Held at the Protea Hotel Marine in Port Elizabeth, it was attended by members of the police, community policing forums, security companies, emergency rescue services and municipal traffic and fire depart-

ments. Similar workshops are also being held in other provinces.

The DNA Project (DNAP) has been lobbying the state to expand the current use of DNA evidence in conjunction with establishing a national DNA criminal intelligence database.

DNAP founder and executive director Vanessa Lynch said the organisation did not have access to the national database but was trying to pressure government to change legislation to increase the size and scope of the state-held database.

This was necessary "so it can be used for criminal intelligence as well as on a case-by-case basis".

She added: "Forensic DNA evidence plays a vital role in criminal investigations."

The DNA Project is also lobbying for the Criminal Law (Forensic Procedures) Amendment Bill



FIGHTING CRIME: DNA Project founder and executive director Vanessa Lynch was in Port Elizabeth to launch the Eastern Cape's first DNA awareness campaign

PHOTOGRAPH: MIKE HOLMES

B2-2009 (also referred to as the "DNA Bill") which was drafted and adopted by cabinet in December

2008. The DNA Bill, still under review by parliament, "seeks to address gaps in our current legis-

lation dealing with the collection, storage and use of DNA evidence".

Lynch left her career as

an attorney in 2005 to run DNAP full time after her father was murdered during a robbery in 2004.

Realising the vital role DNA evidence could play in investigating crime, she began lobbying to expand the existing DNA database in South Africa.

Lynch said there was only "one chance to collect evidence at a crime scene which, if lost, is lost forever".

"We are not trying to teach people how to become crime scene investigating officers.

"The core message is not to touch evidence.

"The importance is to learn to preserve and protect a crime scene, so forensic experts are able to collect uncontaminated evidence by the time they get to the crime scene," she said.

For instance, Lynch said, victims of sexual assault should not change their clothes, shower or wash any part of their

bodies until DNA evidence had been collected.

"A rape victim should visit a registered medical doctor or forensic nurse examiner immediately after the assault for treatment of any injuries and for the collection of forensic evidence."

At crime scenes where a murder had occurred, she said the area should be demarcated to prevent entry.

"It is better to demarcate a larger area first which could be made smaller if necessary.

"In this way, evidence which may be found in the outer proximity of the crime scene will not be inadvertently lost or contaminated.

"Use any kind of physical barrier to cordon off the scene if barrier tape is not available," Lynch said.

For more information on forthcoming workshops e-mail: info@dnaproject.co.za