



Vanessa Lynch and Carolyn Hancock at the parliamentary hearings in July.

Police given insights into DNA evidence

MEMBERS of NGO, the DNA Project, cheered on as the Criminal Law Forensic Procedures Amendment Bill was approved in Parliament on Tuesday, 13 August, while they were training Brighton Beach SAP cluster commanders about the use of DNA evidence to help solve crimes.

Also known as the DNA Bill, the Criminal Law (Forensic Procedures) Amendment Bill, has been the central focus of the DNA Project for the last eight years, since Vanessa Lynch founded the NGO a year after the vicious murder of her father. Although there was DNA evidence at the crime scene it was never identified, collected and analysed to identify the killers, which meant they were never found.

If the bill is enacted all criminals or suspected criminals, including those already in jail, will be forced to give a DNA sample to the police. Their DNA profile would be stored on a national database, while the samples are destroyed. The original draft allowed for the storing of these samples, but this was challenged by human rights clauses in the Constitution. DNA may also be taken from volunteers so they may be excluded as suspects.

Fighting for all of this on the local front is Dr Carolyn Hancock, who joined the NGO after watching Vanessa Lynch on Carte Blanche, outlining the challenges faced in terms of collection and analysis of forensic evidence. With a background in genetics, lecturing at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for 15 years, she thought she could help and now works there full time as a director.

According to Carolyn, "when DNA profiling is used judiciously it allows for quick identification of linked or serial crimes and serial offenders; earlier arrests of offenders; provision of valuable criminal intelligence; earlier exoneration of innocent suspects; easier identification of bodies and crime deterrence."

She said the DNA Project has four primary

objectives. "The first is to lobby for a change to the current Criminal Procedures Amendment Bill, which will ensure DNA will be used more effectively in South Africa in crime detection and resolution. Secondly, we want to help implement a post graduate degree in forensic biology at South African universities. Third, is the training of first responders, i.e. SAP, security guards, paramedics and CPFs, on the importance of crime scene preservation and the value of DNA evidence and finally, we want to create public awareness of the benefits of DNA as a crime fighting tool."

Once promulgated, she believes the bill will help police identify more crimes and match suspects to crime scenes; increase the probability of identifying unknown criminals and help in connecting criminals to multiple crime scenes; and allow DNA evidence to prove the innocence of an accused person and identify missing persons or unidentified human remains.

Game-changing bill

CURRENTLY, legislation prevents the full use of DNA to solve crimes because DNA evidence collected won't be processed if there is no suspect.

The bill will allow for the development of a National DNA Criminal Intelligence Database, which will store this DNA evidence to be matched against other crimes, both past and future.

The DNA Project offers DNA awareness training to the people who are likely to be the first on a crime scene such as the police, security guards, paramedics and CPFs to bridge the gap between the science and knowledge of how to preserve DNA evidence at a crime scene.

The commanders of Brighton Beach SAP's cluster team received training conducted by the DNA Project team at the same time that this bill was being passed in parliament. Lt Col Carel Grobler of Brighton Beach SAP found the training informative. "A programme will be designed within the station to ensure information we receive is cascaded down to route level, this will include shift members, crime prevention and detective services."

If the bill becomes law, police will be given more tools for solving crimes and bereaved family members, like Vanessa Lynch, might find solace as unsolved crimes are finally solved. The DNA Bill will now be submitted to the National Assembly and the team hopes its enactment will follow soon.