



Letter to the Editor


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Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

The Australian and New Zealand Forensic Science Society (ANZFSS) is the professional body representing the local forensic science community in Australia. It is therefore right and proper that it makes comment when there are concerns about the forensic sciences published in the scientific or public arena. This we did in response to the PCAST report published in the USA last September 2016. At that time a brief collective summary of a few key points was placed on our website.

The ANZFSS was not alone in taking this approach, as a large number of representative organizations, quite rightly, opted to provide a simple and concise response (see, for instance, Ref. 1). Our response, similar to those of these other organizations, was intended to provide a few salient points. Subsequent to that comment, we also note that at least one comprehensive commentary has been published in the international peer-reviewed literature².

The comments of the ANZFSS have since been the subject of a letter to the editor of the *Australian Journal of Forensic Sciences* by one of the authors of the PCAST report³, and, more recently, a full length article⁴ in the same journal by two authors. Our society was not however given a right of reply to the full-length paper and, as the paper is critical of the wording that was placed on our website, it is only right and proper that a direct response is now provided.

With respect to the subject of validation, we restate that the message on the website was deliberately intended as a simple statement. We also restate our endorsement of any commentary calling for more research where needed to underpin key aspects of forensic science and that all aspects of high quality professional development are essential. Whilst not explicitly stating in our initial response that we support robust and thorough validation studies, the ANZFSS acknowledges that appropriate validation is essential for subsequent reliable interpretation. We did not see the need to endorse the central issue of validation (a recurring theme in the full-length article⁴) as this is self-evident to all of us that work in forensic science. Validation studies are essential prior to implementation of a method into the criminal justice system. All members of the forensic community that work in an accredited laboratory will be entirely conversant with validated standard operating procedures. This is a basic ISO 17025 requirement. Anyone who provides scientific evidence to the criminal justice system will also be very familiar with the need to use validated processes. To comment otherwise, as implied in the recent publication⁴, is misleading and does a disservice to the forensic community in Australia and New Zealand.

The forensic science community does recognize that deficiencies in certain areas of forensic practice do exist and these need to be addressed. The Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency National Institute of Forensic Science (ANZPAA NIFS) is undertaking just such an exercise with the current Research and Innovation Strategy and additionally is assisting with funding of research projects where possible. A number of academic research programmes in Australia and in New Zealand have also long attempted to tackle relevant issues and they are rightly acclaimed on a regular basis. We do note that whilst publication of validation studies is encouraged, such articles are often not accepted into scientific journals on the basis of a lack of novelty. Any gaps in the underpinning sciences and the foundations of forensic science as a discipline are being investigated, and significant research efforts are being directed towards providing the required empirical data. In the recent past, forensic science in Australia and New Zealand has seen studies

across broad areas, with examples including: scientific validation of handwriting and shoe marks, empirical data to assist interpretation of a variety of trace evidence, statistical models for fingerprint identification, massively parallel DNA sequencing, rapid detection of explosives and drugs, evaluative reporting, and interpretation of complex DNA profiles. There are some of many completed or ongoing research projects across the region, with many projects spanning international collaborations as they require truly global efforts; many of these research projects address criticisms made in the PCAST report.

The ANZFSS is a relevant voice for our forensic science community. It reflects the community's high professional standing, and takes a position on both good and poor practice. This is our current position and will be so into the future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Signed,
Council of the Australian and New Zealand Forensic Science Society