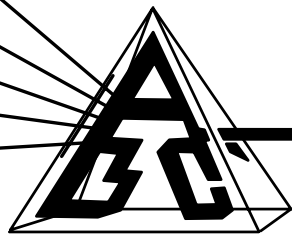


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# Certification News

Volume 5 Issue 2 Winter 1998

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

### Why Should Laboratory Directors Like Certification?

#### Connections – Revisited

In the last newsletter, we discussed the interconnectedness of certification, standardization and accreditation. **Accreditation** -- such as the program provided by the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors/Laboratory Accreditation Board (ASCLD/LAB) -- provides the laboratory director with an independent, objective measure of the quality system in the laboratory. The peer-based criteria for this accreditation program are continuously evaluated. They are subjected to discussion, ongoing evaluation and change, at the discretion of the ASCLD/LAB Board and Delegate Assembly members. The process can be slow, but over the last twenty-plus years, significant improvements have been made to the program.

**Standardization** -- through the adoption of guides and standards promulgated by the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) Committee E-30 on Forensic Science, for example -- provides the laboratory director with independent, peer-based guidance on the proper methods to be employed in the performance of forensic procedures. Similar efforts are currently being funded by the federal government in Technical Working Groups (TWGs) related to almost every forensic subdiscipline. ASTM guides and standards are continuously subject to

evaluation and change, as directed by the forensic professionals who participate in the ASTM process. Once again, the process can be slow, but changes are routinely made to improve the standards.

**Certification** -- when structured properly as in the ABC approach -- provides the Director with an independent, objective, peer-based tool for assessing the competence of Criminalists, and providing structure for, and evaluation of, continuing professional development. The contents of the General Knowledge Exam and Specialty Exams were developed by practicing Criminalists. These contents are subject to routine review and update by Peer Group members, under the leadership of Peer Group Chairs and at the direction of Board and Examination Committee members elected by our member organizations. In addition, the administration of the ABC program is constantly being evaluated for opportunities to improve.

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#### Why Do Changes Take So Long?

The process used to update or change an Accreditation program, Standard Methods and Practices, or Certification programs can seem inordinately slow. But inclusive input and consensus -- the heart of truly peer-based efforts -- has *deliberation* as its basis for acceptance. Professionals desire access to the decision-making process. You want to know what might be required, early in the process, and be able to suggest changes when draft policies appear to have weaknesses or problems. The iterative

President's Message (Continued)

process of reaching out for feedback and incorporating good advice about proposed program changes takes time. And the consensus process demands that due consideration be given to all reasonable input. Especially in a voluntary program.

So why does the laboratory director benefit, despite the grudging responsiveness of the programs? The answer lies in the difference between the perfect and real worlds.

### Lab Directors in Utopia

Picture a lab director's perfect universe. The director knows how every test works, performance criteria to be expected of chemists, quality control parameters to be met, source materials required, the significance of findings and important interpretive guidelines to use when reporting results. The director knows exactly where every staff member is on their path of career progression, and is able to motivate employees to seek new opportunities to learn and grow which will help both the criminalist and the lab. The director routinely evaluates the competence of individuals, especially new staff members.

The director knows every facet of the Quality

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Assurance program, and that it is appropriate for all methods and the skill set of all individuals. In this perfect world, all important activities are inwardly-focused, because attention to these details means the laboratory's clients will never have to question a result. The director is able to affirmatively answer the question "Is the Lab Output Defensible?" every day, based on personal knowledge and understanding of all the facets of the lab and its staff which contribute to this affirmative answer. The director is not subject to any bias arising from previous work experiences or educational background.

Utopia, of course, is not found here on Earth.

### **The Real World**

For the lab director, and frankly anyone in a supervisory role in a crime lab, your life can often be summarily characterized by partial- to significant-ignorance, and trust. It is predominantly outwardly-focused, and has been called by some "a series of interruptions interrupted by interruptions." The real world is full of daily struggles to get resources, keep the lab staffed, buy equipment, and answer calls from clients eager for results or assistance. Directors often look to supervisors to take care of the Utopian details.

But supervisors in crime labs are often in the same position as the director, due to pervasive staffing shortages. Supervisors are often responsible for casework **and** management. The more urgent of these two requirements often gets the lion's share of attention. This leaves many details to "take care of themselves", which can lead to methodological drift, stagnation of personnel development, and substandard competence at critical tasks. Many of the problems in crime labs occur when the good intentions of management – with Utopian expectations from introspective attention in the lab – collide with the practical realities of limited resources and competing external priorities.

### **Trust and Objective Review**

Due to these daily realities, a level of trust is at the core of all successful laboratory operations. To best leverage this trust, the most reasonable approach to the middle ground between full knowledge and full ignorance is to: 1) select methods which have met with general acceptance among other scientists and in the courts; 2) hire people who have prerequisite understanding of the unique world of forensic science; 3) build a program which fosters continuing professional development; 4) routinely challenge the

whole system using PT samples, re-analysis and external review; and 5) use the objective, peer-based programs of standardization, certification and accreditation to insure your objectivity.

### **Thus.....**

Do not pity the lab director. There are excellent programs available to assist in the objective determination of the competence and proper development of staff, adequacy of methods, and sufficiency of the quality assurance structure of the lab. These programs are based on peer input, inclusive design and routine review. If you are a lab director, I hope that you have already come to appreciate how much better your life can be if you augment your trust and knowledge with these objective tools.

If you are the practicing criminalist, I hope that you will give a copy of this note to your lab director. Thank you for being a role model to others, including your lab director. Through your participation, you provide a daily reminder of the power of ABC's objective certification process in demonstrating initial competence and fostering life-long professional development.

*(Editor's Note: This article is derived from a presentation made at the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors in September, 1998. A presentation incorporating some of these ideas was also provided to members of the federal DNA Advisory Board in November, 1998.)*

*Carl*

### **REMINDER**

When adding your certification accomplishment to your signature block, the ABC encourages you to use

**D- ABC for Diplomate**  
and  
**F-ABC for Fellow**

Let these marks of distinction bring you recognition for the effort you put into meeting the certification challenge.

# ABC CALENDAR

## PLEASE POST ON YOUR LAB BULLETIN BOARD

<b>Date/Deadline</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>For More Information, Contact:</b>
Feb 13-15, 1999	ABC Board & Exam Committee Meeting Coronado Springs Resort, Orlando, FL	Julia Dolan 301-762-9800
Feb 17, 1999 <i>Deadline Dec 17, 1998</i>	All ABC Exams, AAFS Annual Meeting Coronado Springs Resort, Orlando, FL	Bob Parsons 561-462-4765 Mike Haas 715-845-3684
March 1, 1999	Deadline for receipt of Recertification Data (without late fee)	
April 20/21, 1999 <i>Deadline February 21, 1998</i>	All ABC Exams, MAAFS Meeting Ocean City, Maryland	Julie Willey 302-739-5874 Julia Dolan 301-762-9800
May 15, 1999 <i>Deadline March 15, 1999</i>	All ABC Exams, CAC Meeting Oakland, CA	Pete Barnett 510-222-8883
July 1, 1999	Final Deadline for Receipt of Recertification Data (with a \$10.00 late fee)	

**To arrange to sit for an examination, you must contact the Registrar by letter or fax (715-845-4156) by the deadline listed.**

**Local contacts are provided for conference information only.**

**To arrange for ABC Exams to be administered in your laboratory, contact your regional representative.**

**American Board of Criminalistics  
P. O. Box 1123  
Wausau, WI 54402**

## What's Happening at the Interface?

*Carl Selavka*

### A Time of Stress on Voluntary Organizations

I have been concerned for some time that the ASCLD/LAB accreditation program is running toward a point of overload. The voluntary process now requires the ASCLD/LAB Board to meet 5 times per year, for 4 days at a time. This is 20 days per person for a very large group of dedicated volunteers. The Board recently completed implementation of most Proficiency Review Committees (PRCs) for most subdisciplines. PRC review of Proficiency Tests (now politically correctly entitled "Performance Tests") will soon require such a massive effort that the volunteers involved PRCs may have very little choice than to perform a merely perfunctory review. And this review is selective to a single individual per subdiscipline in each lab.

Add to these infrastructure issues the reality that ASCLD/LAB has stated publicly that it will incorporate the requirements embodied in ISO Guide 25 over the next few years, and it seems that something will have to give. The laudable goals of increased participation of laboratories in

voluntary accreditation, enhanced rigorousness of the quality standards, and the possibility that the five-year re-accreditation cycle may have to be shorted to meet the new rigorous standards, have all forced some issues of infrastructure to come to the fore. The ASCLD/LAB Board and Delegate Assembly are wrestling with some tough questions of structure at this time, and the outcome of their deliberations will have an impact on all other inter-related organizations like the ABC.

I have a similar concern with the TWGs. What happens after the first documents are published and adopted into accreditation standards as the technical performance guidelines? To maintain relevance, scientific standards must either be drawn in the most general way (such as current ASCLD/LAB criteria for methods other than DNA – "Does the laboratory use methods which are generally accepted by others in the field?"), or mechanisms must be in place for routine review and update. It also remains to be seen whether the outcomes of TWGs will be subject to modified versions of Federal rule-making (as the DAB/TWGDAM quality assurance standards have been). This process itself increases the time from development to the time

of implementation by at least an additional year.

The ASTM process is perfect for updating good standards and guides. I hope that the products of TWGs will make their way into the voluntary ASTM program, to give these standards long life. The efforts of all the scientists working on TWGs may otherwise become quickly obsolete, and there is no guarantee that Federal funding will be available in the future to provide for updating and incorporation of new requirements.

It will be interesting to see how these efforts play out. The ABC will have to adjust and incorporate possible new service requirements into our structure, as the accreditation and standardization efforts dictate. Keeping the interfaces clean and functional between our three inter-related efforts will continue to be an important feature of ABC Board efforts on behalf of our Diplomates, Fellows and Affiliates. If you hear anything about any of these changes, make sure you pass it along to your Member Organization representative. We'll use all the best information and forecasting available to make the best decisions we can for our members.

### GKE Review Cont.

The following two questions are examples of the type removed during the review.

Which of the following methods of evidence recovery offers the greatest efficiency and least potential for contamination:

- hand picking the object surface with forceps
- the use of adhesive tape on the object surface
- scraping of the object surface
- vacuuming of the object surface

The ABO system is analyzed using which one of the following techniques?

- Zone electrophoresis
- Isoelectric focusing
- Antigen-antibody reactions
- Oxidation-reduction reactions

Removed because it represents old technology

# IS ANYONE LISTENING?

## **PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE**

If you are like me, you have probably had the unfortunate experience of taking the time to tell the ABC about a problem with our program, and then feeling like no one was listening. Nothing seemed to happen after you gave us your input. It was this frustration that first led me to inquire about serving on the ABC Board. I figured that my frustration was probably shared by others, so I should work from the inside to help things get better.

The ABC changed its registrar in the summer of 1998. The feedback we have received so far suggests that we are more responsive than we have been before. However, some realities of the changeover continue to make things difficult for a few of our Diplomates and Fellows when their recertification points and Proficiency Test reviews were being tallied. In addition, the database has been completely reworked, because there were obvious gaps in some fields, and other data were in question.

I hope that you will call, write or email our Registrar – Mike Haas – if you have any questions or problems involved with the administration of the program for you. Mike can be reached at the address for ABC found in this newsletter, or at the e-mail address of [abcreg@dwave.net](mailto:abcreg@dwave.net). You may call the ABC Registrar at (715) 845-3684 or FAX to (715) 845-4156. If all else fails, please e-mail me at [CAYR@aol.com](mailto:CAYR@aol.com), and I'll get you a quick solution.

We want to be the best certification body in the world (we are already the largest legitimate forensic science certifying body in the United States...). We will make mistakes along the way, and need you to tell us when this happens! Thank you for helping us to make the ABC a more responsive organization.

## **YES! - GKE REVIEWED AND REVISED**

For those aficionados of the fifties and sixties, the "I LOVE LUCY" sitcom provided a healthy although somewhat unbelievable source of entertainment and amusement. In one particular episode, Lucy was auditioning for the Veta-Vita-Vegemin girl. Just one tablespoon of that tasty elixir would rejuvenate a tired, rundown, lackluster life. Ah, if it would only be that easy to rejuvenate the General Knowledge Examination (GKE). The time had come to thoroughly review the content of the examination for questions that were either outdated or shown not to test well.

On July 24, 1998, the ABC Examination Committee joined by the ABC Executive Board, took apart the GKE, question by question. Each question was reviewed for content to determine if it was addressing the current status within the field of forensic science. The reference for each question was updated and the most current publication where possible was selected. A central issue before the reviewers was whether the question was testing well. Questions that did not provide good discrimination were either removed or restructured. By the end of the day, a critical review had been completed and numerous new questions had been created for sensitivity review. The final result was a new version of the GKE, current and strong, ready for the next wave of forensic scientists.

*Susan Ballou*

*Please see "GKE Review Cont." box next page for samples of questions removed during review.*