

Fact

In the UK, forensic science will always solve a crime?

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When the public are asked to provide an impression of forensic science, they may immediately conjure up ideas of seemingly the most vital of all crime fighting tools. This would not be an incorrect notion and it is certainly true that forensic science has had a hugely positive impact on police work and can now allow investigators to place suspects at the scene of a crime, identify the weapons used and a time of a death. However much of forensic science has become heavily glamorised through fictional media, with such notable examples of CSI and Waking the Dead. These depictions show a science which can produce instant and infallible results. However by definition science is subjective and often these fictional portrayals give an unrealistic vision of its capabilities and realities in order to satisfy the public demand for entertainment and escapism.

The truth is far more complex but by no means less interesting or exciting. Scene of crime officers do not throw themselves through windows whilst firing multiple firearms. What they do is to provide vital information which can assist the police in securing convictions and building a court ready case. Around 80% of the public's knowledge of policing comes from the media (Newburn et al, 2007). As a result much of the public's understanding of their work is blurred and the 'CSI effect' is typical of a distorted public view of the realities of forensic science (see Rowe, 2014). For many, this may seem like an irrelevance but we must acknowledge that criminal justice systems are seemingly staffed and managed by members of the public. With such assumptions made on the credibility of the science to ensure guilt, it could prove the difference between securing a conviction and a suspect walking free.

Forensic science remains a hugely broad and diverse subject and encompasses a vast range of disciplines. Historically the identification of fingerprints marked the summit of science and criminal investigation. With the advancement and accessibility of technology, the skills required of forensic officers has far surpassed fingerprinting and now encompasses both the physical and digital worlds. Forensic investigators have also had to adapt to a far more scientific and technological savvy criminal who have become adept at creating avenues of disinformation as well as 'going equipped' to protect their identities. This often leads to the wasting of time and resources both of which the forensic science service and the police have far less of. Both of these points are ignored in fictional representations, with criminals often portrayed as ignorant of such concepts and resources being vast and unending (Baskin & Sommers, 2012).

The process of forensic investigation follows three key phases which are enacted by both police and scene of crime officers. The first is carried out by first responders who must protect and secure the area and preserve what evidence is available. This is followed by an evidence gathering stage, in which officers explore designated sections to identify pieces relevant to the investigation of the incident. Finally the evidence gathered and the methods of collection must be examined for mistakes or discrepancies and be prepared for the scrutiny of the courts (Baskin & Sommers, 2012).

The first distinctive myth generated by the 'CSI effect' is the time in which all three processes operate within. It is often shown in dramas that all three stages are carried out within a 45 minute window. In reality, the quicker this process takes the greater the exposure to contamination and the incorrect analysis of evidence being presented. Large scale forensic investigations can take on average weeks but more often months to ensure safe conclusions.

Throughout the different stages, the risk of contamination and loss of evidence is high. The stage in which this risk is at its greatest is initially, when crime scenes are often unprotected and unsealed. The realities of police work will often destroy vital evidence at a crime scene, much to the dismay of forensic officers (Genge, 2004). Lack of training, resources and time will often mean that areas remain exposed to public intrusion creating doubt in the legitimacy of the evidence.

As with all other policing tools, forensic science is regulated through numerous pieces of legislation, most notably the Regulation of Investigative Powers Act (RIPA) and the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE). Both pieces of legislation are designed to ensure that police work is monitored and able to stand up to scrutiny (Rowe, 2014). Legal representatives will conduct their own investigations into the evidential collection process, often with the intention of discrediting such information in order to provide doubt of their client's guilt. The actions of many fictional detectives may provide the public with an entertaining evening but would never be able to be justified under the rigours of such investigations or the restrictions placed on officers by legislation (Cook & Tattersall, 2008). Nor should police investigations be immune from boundaries with the historical case of Stefan Kiszko highlighting the importance of regulating the actions of those placed in a position of authority.

Police officers themselves are trained to focus on the lockdown or sealing off scenes through the use of cordons and barriers. In the case of murder, officers will follow the 'Murder Investigation Manual, which advisors them on the core requirements of scene preservation. Crime scenes can often be in multiple different locations increasing the pressures on ensuring that evidence is not at risk of contamination (see Becker & Dutelle, 2013). Many such areas are often difficult to control and are hampered by the elements themselves, which act as a barrier for forensic officers. A rain and wind swept hillside may seem an ideal setting for a dark crime drama but such conditions often destroy the very things that are needed to carry out an effective investigation and can hamper the processing stage.

A question long debated by investigators, forensic scientists and criminologists alike has been the distinction between evidence and truth. In principle, this chapter has attempted to recognise the fallibility of forensic science and dispel the untruths which are so dominant in

fictional crime dramas (Baldwin, 1993). It is also not attempting to diminish the outstanding work and contribution which it has had on securing convictions and ensuring dangerous and violent offenders are removed from society. However, the question still remains whether evidence is truth? Forensic science can often not explain the circumstances behind the events which led to the incident taking place. In drama, such outcomes are often shown as derived from the scientific evidence gathered. The margin of error is however so great that simply placing suspects at a crime does not necessarily imply guilt. Roles are not often focussed on prosecution but rather the establishing of facts in a case. This would suggest that forensic science is a tool to search for the truth and should be used in conjunction with other methods of criminal investigation.

Throughout countless fictional dramas there has always been a blurring of the line between reality and fiction particularly when it comes to the portrayal of crime and its subsequent police investigations. It is impossible to regulate creative licence and producers are eager to provide entertainment which will shock and intrigue audiences. It is also important that this is balanced with a dose of reality now and again and try to ensure that the fictional representation of forensic science does not become the accepted public truth.

References

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