

## SKILLS THE NATION NEEDS

Detailed analytical expertise is vital to convict the guilty and exonerate the innocent. As a forensic biologist, Suzanne Armitage is a key member of a team that has helped secure convictions in many high-profile criminal cases

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# I'm not a number...

I'm a

# forensic scientist

a job worth doing, not a cash saving

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# When you can't afford to get it wrong

**DR SUZANNE ARMITAGE** is a forensic biologist working at the Forensic Science Service laboratory in Chorley, Lancashire. Among other cases, her lab dealt with the evidence used in the case of Shannon Matthews' kidnapping and Britain's worst serial killer, Harold Shipman.

Her area of specific expertise is focused on the biological materials involved in criminal cases, be they blood, semen, saliva or sweat.

"The circumstances of any major case are outlined to us through the victim's or prosecution's version of the facts and those of the defence. Items or intimate samples are sent to our laboratory for investigation. On that basis I decide which items are worth examining and for what biological materials."

The examinations are then undertaken by an assistant forensic biologist and Suzanne will decide what items, if any, should also be sent for DNA profiling.

"I then prepare a scientific report or statement in which I review the findings and interpret their significance in relation to

the prosecution and defence versions." If required, she can also be called to attend court as an expert witness.

Suzanne joined the FSS in November 2000 with a degree and PhD in bio-chemistry before beginning the company's own

13-month, intensive graduate training programme. She qualified in December 2001 as part of the strict accreditation system in place at FSS.

"Everything we do is governed by the FSS quality management system which sets national standards we have to abide by. Compliance is checked via regular audits by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service."

Currently, Suzanne is also seconded to the Department of Health as a forensic advisor to the national support team for sexual violence. Over a two-year period the team were tasked

with visiting every police force to advise on the development of sexual assault referral centres, designed to ensure best practice when dealing with the victims of violent sexual crimes.

But, with the Chorley laboratory closing at the end of March, Suzanne is now looking for a new job.



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## Where's the evidence for axing the Forensic Science Service?

**THE FORENSIC SCIENCE SERVICE** is a world-renowned centre of cutting edge science, crime scene analysis and pioneering developments in DNA technology that have brought crime detection into the 21st century.

But the Home Office stunned the scientific and criminal justice establishment in December

when it announced without consultation that the FSS is to be closed down by April 2012, its work transferred to the private sector and the police.

Internationally renowned scientists like Professor Sir Alec Jeffreys, pioneer of DNA fingerprinting, condemned the decision. He warned that the UK risks being left without any focus ▶



► for research or ability to conduct investigations beyond routine analysis. Prominent justice campaigners such as Sara Payne have voiced alarm.

The core fear of FSS' forensic scientists and other professionals is that there are gaping holes in the government approach which will denude the criminal justice system of impartial, independent advice and cause cost to determine justice.

At present the forensic science marketplace is

fragile and private sector contractors are struggling to survive. FSS staff have asked: what safeguards will be put in place if private suppliers opt out under pressure from the police to cut charges? Who will provide extra capacity in the face of major incidents such as terrorist attacks?

Building up in-house provision may be possible for larger police forces. But no evidence has been put forward to support the idea that the police can do the work cheaper, or to

show how smaller forces will equip themselves with all the necessary specialisms.

Key regulatory issues to ensure that police forces and private contractors operate on a level playing field of recognisable qualifications and professional codes have yet to be addressed.

Research and development is expensive and runs the risk of failure, so the chances of R&D being funded in a competitive market are

slight. Similarly, maintaining FSS' national and local archives will provide little financial return but is essential for the resolution of legacy 'cold' cases.

Evidence? There's precious little.



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