

DNA Evidence and Crime-solving

“Los Angeles; ‘Riverbend Rapist’ Suspect Is sought; LAPD asks public for help in finding a fugitive accused of assaulting seven women,” The Los Angeles Times, October 1, 2004.

Hunt for the “Riverbend Rapist” is being stepped up by L.A. police. Arnulfo Vargas is charged with six counts of rape, four of sexual assault, four of kidnapping and two of robbery. Vargas disappeared along with his wife shortly after he refused to provide a DNA sample from his cheek against the recovered victims. After they disappeared, DNA collected from their home matched that from four of the victims.

“5 Named Solely by DNA are indicated,” Chicago Tribune Company, October 1, 2004.

The DuPage County grand jury indicted five more “John Does” this week using their DNA identification numbers because officials do not yet know their names.

“Man charged in slaying of SIU student; Evidence crops up from 1981 killing,” Chicago Tribune, October 2, 2004.

Based on new evidence, Daniel Woloson, has been charged with the 1981 murder of a student. Woloson was on parole for a burglary conviction for two months when he allegedly murdered 21-year-old Susan Schumake, who was found strangled and raped in 1981. Police suspected a convicted murderer, now dead, whose DNA did not match the new evidence. DNA from Woloson’s, another suspect in the case was tested and the match was confirmed.

“Blood samples could identify suicide bomber,” The Daily Telegraph (Sydney, Australia), October 5, 2004.

The Indonesian police believe to have identified a second suicide bomber involved in last month's attack on the Australian embassy in Jakarta. The second bomber is believed to be Hassan, friend of Heri Golun, the first bomber previously identified from DNA samples taken from his family. Blood tests from Hassan’s father match those from the remains found at the blast site.

“DNA of 30 ID'd on farm; 8 more women added to list of Vancouver victims.” The Toronto Sun, October 7, 2004.

Vancouver Police have turned up 30 separate DNA samples from the pig farm of accused serial killer Robert Pickton. 27 matches are those of women, who are on a list of 69 missing women in the area, 3 remain unidentified.

“Portland man is found guilty of rape, kidnap.” The Oregonian, October 5, 2004.

A 35 year-old man with a previous felony conviction, was arrested for rape after DNA from the crime was matched to the FBI’s DNA databank.

Controversies Concerning DNA Databanks and Laboratories

“Halt in executions urged until review,” Chicago Tribune Company, October 1, 2004.

Houston City’s Police Chief believes that Inmates should not be executed if their convictions rested on evidence analyzed by the troubled Houston crime lab, until the work can be reviewed.

“Police Lab's Troubles Grow; Problems in Houston Lead to Moratorium on Executions,” The Washington Post, October 2, 2004.

There have been more problems at Houston’s police crime lab after the news that an internal investigation has discovered 280 abandoned and mislabeled boxes of evidence. The evidence included a fetus and body parts, along with guns and other weapons, all found in a police property room. The boxes contain evidence from 8,000 cases, including open and closed murder cases, from about 1979 to 1991. The boxes had been placed in the room predating DNA testing, which began in 1992.

“Lee is innocent, lawyers declare; they urge jurors to use common sense,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans) October 5, 2004.

Baton Rouge -- Despite all the DNA evidence the prosecution says it has against him, Derrick Todd Lee is innocent, his attorneys declared, and they asked jurors to use common sense to see that.

“Analyst scrutinized in Napper case; Attorney accuses Chu of perjury for saying client was the only possible DNA match.” The Houston Chronicle, October 5, 2004.

The attorney for Lawrence Napper is contending that a Houston police analyst may have committed perjury when he testified that Napper was the only person who’s DNA could be matched in the 2001 sexual-assault case of a 6-year-old boy. The analyst, Joseph Chu, allegedly falsely testified that all the DNA evidence had been exhausted, with no room left for independent testing by the defense.

DNA Database Funding and Backlog

“The Nation; In Brief/Washington, DC; House Votes to Step Up Use of DNA Testing,” Los Angeles Times, October 7, 2004.

The House approved legislation giving rape victims and convicted felons greater access to DNA testing on a 393-14 vote. The bill would provide \$755 million in grants over the next five years to clear about 350,000 rape evidence kit samples from the DNA backlog, and \$350 million to improve legal representation in death penalty cases.

DNA-based Post Conviction Challenges

“Testing Ordered On Old V. Cases; DNA Work Affects Dozens of Inmates,” The Washington Post, October 1, 2004. (*See also Controversies Concerning DNA Testing and Laboratories*)

DNA testing has been ordered by Virginia Governor Mark Warner in dozens of old cases in order to determine whether modern day examination of biological samples can lead to the exoneration of prisoners convicted of violent crimes who are still being held in Virginia’s prisons. Warner declared that \$200,000 will be spent to evaluate the testing in 40 old cases.

“Ellis asks for halt to executions from county; Chief of HPD agrees as both cite concerns over crime lab,” The Houston Chronicle, October 1, 2004.

State Sen. Rodney Ellis called for a moratorium on the executions of inmates from Harris County, amplifying Houston Police Chief Harold Hurtt's concerns about going ahead with death row cases, which may contain evidence handled by the Houston crime lab.

“Putting A Price on Innocents' Lost Years; Exonerations Up, Md. Lacks Formula For Restitution,” The Washington Post, October 4, 2004.

Michael Austin served 27 years in a Maryland maximum-security prison for a murder that DNA evidence says that he did not commit. Now Maryland and other states, are facing a politically sensitive and morally complex decision: What is the value of a life unjustly spent behind bars? What is fair compensation?

“DA says inmate should be freed; Rosenthal says testimony flawed in rape case; he may seek retrial,” The Houston Chronicle, October 1, 2004.

A Houston man who has spent 17 years in prison for the rape of a teenage girl was wrongly convicted because of flawed scientific testimony. The DA believes that George Rodriguez should be released.

“Retest shows lab botched basic work; Misreading of DNA test led to bad testimony in Rodriguez case,” The Houston Chronicle October 1, 2004.

The latest forensic tests in the George Rodriguez case have shown that not only had the Houston crime-lab supervisor misinterpreted evidence but also that his most basic work on the case was incorrect.

“Va.'s DNA Hunt for the Innocent from Old Cases Breaks Ground; Exonerations Led Warner to Act,” The San Francisco Chronicle, October 5, 2004.

While trying to confirm that all the evidence from a convicted rapist's file had been destroyed, the state of Virginia's top forensic scientist came across an old cotton swab attached to the file. The swab had been passed over by Houston crime lab employees, and later turned out to contain DNA evidence which led to the exoneration of a Virginia man who has served 15 years for the crime.

DNA Science and Technology

“National roundup: Science: Forgotten man of DNA dies at 88,” The Guardian (London), October 7, 2004.

Maurice Wilkins, the forgotten man of DNA, died on Tuesday October 5, aged 88. Professor Wilkins, of King's College London, shared the 1962 Nobel Prize for physiology and medicine, with the late Francis Crick and James Watson. In 1953 the three identified the double helix structure of DNA.