

Crime scene DNA: “Good as Gold”

THE CASE

It was nearly two o’clock in the morning when officers from the Codiac Regional RCMP responded to a 911 call from a home in the Moncton, New Brunswick area.

A teenage girl was waiting with her mother. She had been the victim of a sexual assault. While babysitting at a neighbour’s house, she had fallen asleep in a basement bedroom. Just after midnight, she was awakened by a naked man holding her down on the bed. His face was covered by pantyhose pulled over his head.

The attacker raped the girl, then threatened to return and kill her if she told anyone about the incident. He fled the scene.

The victim told police that the adult male resident of the house returned about an hour later to find her crying in the living room of his home. He drove her immediately to her mother’s place of work and together they called the RCMP.

“Right from the start our officers sensed something was wrong,” says Constable Roland Cormier of the Major Crime Unit of the Codiac Regional RCMP. “The girl’s story made sense, but the male resident’s behaviour set off some alarm bells.”

THE INVESTIGATION

The officers on the scene were surprised that a large Rottweiler dog in the residence had made no commotion during the break-in and assault. The police also felt the man was trying to evade drop on their conversations as they conducted their investigation at the crime scene.

The victim was taken to hospital for a medical examination. With the use of a sexual assault kit, semen was found and collected as evidence.

The next morning, uniformed officers made a neighbourhood check. A woman across the street said that while she was getting ready for bed at about 11:00 p.m., she saw the male resident of the house return home in his vehicle. She said he left again just before midnight.

“The man had claimed he was with friends all evening,” recalls Constable Cormier. “The discrepancy between his account and that of the neighbour moved him to the top of our list of suspects.”

The Codiac RCMP, like all police forces in Canada, has access to various national data banks including the Canadian Police Information Centre. A check on CPIC turned up a critical piece of information – the male resident was a convicted sex offender. A check on SPURS (Simplified Paperless Universal

Reporting System) revealed that he had provided a blood sample in 2000 to the National DNA Data Bank.

“With that information,” says Cormier, “we went into high gear.”

THE REGIONAL FORENSIC LABORATORY

The first call went to Gary Verret of Biology Operations at the Halifax Regional Forensic Laboratory. He was able to quickly identify the crucial evidence, which he forwarded immediately to Ottawa for fast-tracked DNA profiling.

It was the Canada Day long weekend, but the case couldn’t wait. Marc Lett of Biology Operations in Ottawa spent the holiday developing DNA profiles from the evidence.

“The results could not have been better,” Lett recalls. “All the DNA tests combined to form a complete male DNA profile.”

THE MATCH

The information was entered into the Data Bank’s Crime Scene Index, which stores DNA profiles from thousands of crime scenes across Canada. By cross-referencing with the Convicted Offender Index, the Data Bank got a hit.

“The whole process only took about a week,” says Constable Cormier, “then we got word through the lab in Halifax that there was a match with a guy who had served time in prison.”

To protect individual privacy, the profiles in the National DNA Data Bank are stripped of any personal information and are identified only by a bar code number. To identify the suspect in the Codiac case, the Canadian Criminal Records Information Service of the RCMP matched the bar code number with a name. It was the male resident of the house where the assault took place.

“When I went to the Crown Prosecutor for an arrest warrant with the DNA match he said, ‘This

is as good as gold!’” remembers Cormier. A judge agreed and the warrant was issued.



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Unfortunately, the prime suspect had already skipped town, leaving Moncton the day after the assault. Following up on a tip from his former wife, the suspect was picked up in Montreal at his sister’s home. Constable Cormier flew to Quebec and confronted the man.

THE RESULTS

“He was very smooth, denying everything,” recalls Cormier. “When we put the DNA link on the table, he continued to bluff but you could tell it got to him. He soon asked to call his sister and after she arrived in the interrogation room, he confessed. We had him.”

Cormier maintains the DNA evidence, along with the involvement of the staff at Biology Operations and the National DNA Data Bank, played a critical role in solving the case. He estimates it saved him weeks of work just to make the case for an arrest warrant.

Just as important, it saved emotional stress on the victim.

“She was so traumatized by the assault that she denied her attacker could have been the male resident of the house,” he says. “She remembered very few details that could identify the man. Without the DNA evidence and the quick link through the Halifax Lab and the National DNA Data Bank, we would have had to use a composite artist or maybe hypnosis to help her remember. But each time you force the victim to relive the incident, it creates a lot of pain. You just don’t want to put anybody through that if you don’t have to.”

The suspect was eventually convicted on the basis of DNA evidence and was returned to prison.

THE FUTURE

The New Brunswick rape case is a good example of how Canadian laboratories, like the ones in Halifax and Ottawa, are working with the National DNA Data Bank to speed up and simplify local police investigations. It also points toward some areas of greater application of the Data Bank’s powerful technology and capacity.

“Looking to the future,” says the Officer in Charge of the National DNA Data Bank, Dr. Ron Fournier, “we’re working on protocols and systems to provide faster results to assist local police forces along with other specialized forensic investigations. That could include using the same technology to assist in the potential identification of victims of mass disasters.”

The technology and the potential are already there at Canada’s National DNA Data Bank.