

By Liam McDougall, Home Affairs Editor

THE crisis in Scottish fingerprinting deepened last night after officials at the Scottish Criminal Records Office (SCRO) appeared to admit that serving forensic experts had wrongly identified prints in criminal investigations.

Ian Todd, deputy director of the SCRO, which houses Scotland's main fingerprint bureau, said a situation where two experts disagree on an identity "cannot be acceptable and correct".

Experts at the Scottish Fingerprint Service (SFS) are facing legal action over identifying a print at a murder scene in 1997 as being that of detective Shirley McKie. In June, three analysts from the SFS in Aberdeen reported to the Lord Advocate that the print was not McKie's.

But the Glasgow SFS bureau, which made the McKie identification, has refused to acknowledge any mistake. In fact, the Sunday Herald can reveal that in August 2000, Robert McKenzie and Alan Dunbar – still the Glasgow bureau's most senior experts – made a presentation at Tulliallan Police College showing why the print was McKie's.

Todd's statement that it is unacceptable for experts to disagree means there is a massive split in the SFS. Nationalist MSP Alex Neil said: "I will be calling for a major parliamentary inquiry to get this shambles sorted out."

27 November 2005

Readers' Views

Fingerprint debate

YOUR article "Fingerprints: scientific proof or just a matter of opinion" was based on leaked confidential documents intended to stimulate internal discussion. Contrary to your article they do not highlight any differences within the Scottish Fingerprint Service. In particular, you failed to make a couple of important points.

All experts within the Scottish Fingerprint Service agree that fingerprint evidence is the expert opinion of identification based on the scientific fact that fingerprints are unique to every individual. Experts may have differences of opinion concerning the quality of information and/or features revealed in a particular print and whether the points in disagreement can be explained. However, given that it is accepted that fingerprints can only belong to one person, then in a situation where experts agree that the print is of suitable quality to be identified but do not agree on the identity then both opinions cannot be equally acceptable and correct.

There is no dispute within the Scottish Fingerprint Service as to whether fingerprinting is a matter of fact or opinion and no difference of opinion exists between the SFS and the international fingerprint community on the identification of fingerprints.

Ian Todd Deputy Director

Scottish Criminal Records Office

Note: The "leaked confidential document" referred to in Mr Todd's letter is a report entitled '**FP identification – opinion or fact**' circulated by **Euan Innes** Head of the **Scottish Fingerprint Service**. It will be re-produced on this site in full tomorrow to allow readers to decide if it was intended to "stimulate" discussion" as claimed by Mr Todd or is yet another attempt to cover up the dissent within the service.

A s the UK fingerprint examiner who has visited more overseas fingerprint bureaux than any other serving or retired officer, I have often been concerned and, on occasions, even appalled by some of the practices that I have seen abroad.

I am aware of procedures where no checking is undertaken by colleagues to ensure the validity of identifications; in some countries a dictatorial approach is adopted, whereby only the head of the bureau is allowed to decide upon identifications; in many countries there are absolutely no training programmes, or indeed training schools, and in others, officers may attain expert status after just a few months.

Very few, to my knowledge, have a regulatory body such as we have in the UK with the ACPO National Fingerprint Board.

More worrying, is the number of erroneous identifications occurring in some other countries, the recent error by the FBI in the Madrid bombing being such a high-profile example. Despite hundreds of thousands of fingerprint comparisons being undertaken each year within the UK, the error rate remains so small that it is hardly worthy of mention. When errors occur, they are due to human error and a failure to follow the ACPO guidelines and policies.

It is regrettable that so many incompetent and inept persons have seen it their role to comment upon issues about which they are totally ignorant .

Fingerprint identification is a straightforward, uncomplicated process, not rocket science as many of the more vocal practitioners seem to want to convey. If conducted competently and cautiously, it is still the finest form of personal identification yet devised.

Martin Leadbetter

Hertfordshire