

Being a senior forensic practitioner

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Spotlight on a role: The skills and experience needed for this pivotal crime scene duty

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As a senior forensic practitioner in frontline crime scene examination, my role is to attend crime scenes to recover forensic and fingerprint evidence, and to conduct evidential photography. I mostly attend serious and complex scenes, where I ensure that the forensic strategy is sound and I manage resources and personnel.

My role as a leader is split. From Monday to Friday, I lead a team of 22 in West London during the day. When I'm on late-turn duty, at nights and at the weekend, I am responsible for a pan-London resource of up to 20 people. I ensure the competence of my team, including their compliance with forensic regulation, which is crucial as we are working towards gaining accreditation with ISO 17020.

I enjoy the challenges, problem solving and variety involved in my role. Every day is different. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been especially challenging for us to continue attending scenes in the presence of others. We've adapted our methods to include enhanced triage over the phone, and we explain how we're working so that people know what to expect.

This has better enabled social distancing at scenes without the loss of information from face-to-face conversation. In other ways, we were already prepared. Scene examiners are experienced forensic practitioners who routinely work in PPE and employ contamination avoidance measures.

Examining crime scenes requires an inquisitive mind. You have to consider not only what you can see, but also what you cannot. For example, some types of evidence require enhancement with imaging and chemical techniques, to name a few. You need to obtain and process information from a variety of sources to define your strategy, then select the techniques you will employ – and in which order – to maximise the opportunities.

In my 20 years of service, I've seen some amazing developments. At the start of my career, you

needed a large visible blood stain to get a DNA profile. Now, this can be achieved even when blood is not visible to the naked eye. Similarly, the forensic and evidential potential of a mobile phone has changed significantly over time, in part because of the volume of data it can now yield.

Forensics is interdisciplinary and has expanded so much since I began my career. I wonder how the sector will evolve and what new techniques will become commonplace in the next 20 years.

For anyone at the beginning of their career, my advice would be to take every opportunity to learn. There is a wealth of knowledge and experience out there, so ask questions and be proactive in your learning and development.

Everyone in policing plays their role – from having a positive impact on a victim of crime, to presenting evidence at court. Irrespective of your rank or role, never underestimate the part you play, your contribution and the value you bring to your organisation.

- This article was peer reviewed by Superintendent Kate Anderson, Cambridgeshire Constabulary

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