

An explanation for the lab's actions might lie in a ministerial taskforce report from October 2005, unearthed by The Australian, which recommended crucial validation of new robotic equipment be rushed through to save time.

The taskforce was formed to look into serious concerns being aired in courts and the media over delays and backlogs in testing crime-scene samples.

Its report noted that half a million dollars had been put aside for the purchase of robotics and the complete automation of processing of samples. The same technology reduced staff from 450 to 110 in the DNA unit of Britain's Forensic Science Service and significantly increased output.

"The purchase of this equipment will not have an immediate effect, due to the time required to validate the instruments, change the practices within the laboratory, and train staff," the report said.

"The validation can take up to 12 months if the process is started anew, however – according to expert sources – can be shortened to four to six weeks by utilising the validation experience of other jurisdictions.

"It is recommended that the Chief Executive Officer of the Institute ensures that, when validating future equipment, the validation work undertaken by other jurisdictions to introduce equipment and/or automation processes is utilised to minimise validation time while maintaining scientific accountability and integrity by 31 October 2005."

Dr Wright told a new episode of the [Shandee's Legacy podcast](#): "I believe that the failure to identify Shandee's murderer can be traced back to Project 13 – this deceptive decision that was made in 2007 to knowingly introduce a flawed method that these managers, these senior scientists, knew would fail."

The automated extraction method used successfully around the world failed in Queensland Health's hands because the lab decided to change critical settings recommended by the manufacturer, she said. Various changes were made to the method between its launch in 2007 to 2016 when it was abandoned, that would have improved DNA yields, "but to what extent, we don't know exactly", Professor Wilson-Wilde said.

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Hot Issues Brief

Recent media interest in Forensic Science Queensland

15 September 2023

Issue

- There has been recent active media interest in Forensic Science Queensland (FSQ).
- Following the recent interviews held between Professor Linzi Wilson-Wilde OAM, Chief Executive Officer of FSQ, and journalists from The Australian, Hedley Thomas and David Murray, further questions have been raised relating to evidence provided to the Commission of Inquiry into Forensic DNA Testing in Queensland ("COI") by Professor Linzi Wilson-Wilde.
- It has been identified that Mr Thomas intends to pursue a personalised narrative that calls into question the integrity of Professor Wilson-Wilde, referencing the expert opinion she provided to the COI, part of which pertained to Project 13.
- Mr Thomas will likely allege that Professor Wilson-Wilde deliberately misled the COI about the impact and importance of the DNA yield aspect of Project 13, with the clear aim of securing employment in the Queensland DNA laboratory post-COI.
- These allegations will be made in print and online media articles that are due to be published on or around Friday 15 September 2023, will coincide with the release of a further episode of the Shandee's Legacy podcast and will further build on themes and issues in associated media published by The Australian last week.
- Professor Wilson-Wilde was commissioned during the COI to review extensive documentation associated with contamination events occurring in the laboratory in 2007 and 2008. The contamination events, along with low DNA recovery/yield, were associated with Project 13, which was undertaken in 2007 to support the implementation of a new automated extraction methodology.
- A draft version of the Project 13 report was included in the extensive suite of documents for Professor Wilson-Wilde to review, within a 1-week timeframe, in order to determine the possible cause of the contamination issues and assess the response to the contamination issues.
- Professor Wilson-Wilde provided an expert opinion which outlined major flaws with the project design, content, and outcomes, and noted that the identified flaws were mitigated in subsequent projects that were conducted following the cessation of the fully automated method.
- It should be noted that Professor Wilson-Wilde was highly critical of Project 13 as a validation project and report overall. Her report was focussed on the scope prescribed by the COI (which focussed on the issue of contamination) and was provided within tight time constraints. Additionally, it was anticipated that the expected overhaul of the laboratory's procedures and practices post-COI, in combination with the planned case review process, would further remediate and continue to improve any residual issues.
- Professor Wilson-Wilde is confident that Project 13 issues do not create ongoing risks at FSQ given that there is now a new robotic platform in use, further training has occurred, and new processes have recently been introduced by the FSQ Manager Innovation. Notwithstanding, extraction methodology is being reviewed for the

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purposes of continuous improvement and providing confidence to the FSQ leadership group, and others, that all methods currently in use have been thoroughly assessed.

- All documents referred to in the media reports are publicly available on the COI website, including the Project 13 report and Professor Wilson-Wilde's expert opinion about Project 13.

Background

- Through liaison with the Queensland Health media team, Professor Wilson-Wilde previously conducted two media interviews on Thursday 31 August 2023 with journalists from two separate media publications (The Australian and The Courier Mail).
- The four-hour interview with The Australian's Hedley Thomas and David Murray was conducted in the presence of Mr Walter Sofronoff KC and Ms Julie Dick SC, in their capacity as Co-Chairs of the FSQ Interim Advisory Board (and in Mr Sofronoff's capacity as former Commissioner of the COI).
- A second interview was held between Mr Thomas and Professor Wilson-Wilde on Friday 8 September 2023 to clarify matters raised during the first interview, primarily focussed on Project 13.
- Print and online media articles were subsequently published in The Australian on Saturday 9 September 2023 and Monday 11 September 2023 (see Attachment 1), and a new episode of the Shandee's Legacy podcast was released on 9 September 2023.
- In the media articles and podcast episode, Mr Thomas expressed the view that the low DNA recovery associated with the implementation of Project 13 was the "ground zero" for the failures that impacted the Blackburn testing in 2013. Some critical and inflammatory commentary was also made about the staff who authored the Project 13 report, two of whom still work at FSQ.
- Prior to publication Professor Wilson-Wilde had informed Mr Thomas that this view was not entirely correct—the issues identified in Project 13 were somewhat mitigated in 2009, with further work conducted through Projects 21 and 22 and the validation of a new partly manual, partly automated method, and DNA yield may still have been an issue coupled to other unfortunate errors in the Blackburn samples in 2013—however these points were not addressed in the podcast.
- It is noted that the significant contamination and DNA recovery issues associated with Project 13 were known at the time of implementation, and were raised by members of the project team, however a decision to implement the method despite these concerns was made.
- Documents indicate that the implementation of Project 13 was directed to occur by the Managing Scientist at the time, Ms Vanessa Ientile, despite concerns raised by scientists, although no formal sign-off can be located. Ms Ientile ceased working for Queensland Health in mid-2008. Mr Thomas and Mr Murray have contacted Ms Ientile directly for comment about Project 13. Ms Ientile has, to date, declined to comment.
- The Project 13 Report abstract contains a statement which appears, on the face of it, to be untrue, namely that the outcomes of the automated extraction method were "comparable" to those of the manual extraction method.
- The issues with contamination required the automated method to be ceased some months after implementation, until the issues were resolved in 2009.
- Whilst the introduction of a manual step in 2008 reduced the yield issue to some degree, and the contamination events were investigated and largely resolved in 2009,

a modified automated extraction methodology remained in use until 2016. That method continued to have yield issues.

- No records have yet been located to indicate further work was completed on the issue of DNA yield in Project 13.
- Any cases suspected of being impacted by these issues will be identified and included for assessment and remediation along with other cases being reviewed post-COI.

Actions to date

- FSQ has responded to requests for interview and media comment and has acknowledged the previous failings at the laboratory.

- **Irrelevant**
- **Irrelevant**

Media response

A media holding statement is not required. Once the nature of the media publication is known, any necessary response from the department can be considered.

Confidential

- Recent case discussions relating to a Coronial matter have resulted in Professor Wilson-Wilde and Dr Duncan Taylor (forensic statistics expert from Forensic Science South Australia) expressing views to the Coroner about the appropriate testing in a case that directly contradicted the views of Dr Kirsty Wright. Dr Wright was present in this meeting and had been engaged by the Coroner previously to advise on the matter.
- Professor Wilson-Wilde spoke to the annual Coroner's Conference in late August about the importance of ensuring that external advice is sought from forensic scientists who hold current competencies and relevant experience in the processes they are advising about, and that external testing is only undertaken by accredited laboratories.
- A proactive positive media release is expected 18 September 2023 announcing the recently successful FSQ funding from Government.

Contact person

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