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DNA Lab Fires Technician for Faking Results Among Cases From Analyst Are Dozen For FBI, L.A. Police

By Dan Evans

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LOS ANGELES - A high-profile Maryland laboratory, which conducted DNA tests for the O.J. Simpson trial and the JonBenet Ramsey murder investigation, has fired a technician for falsifying results in at least a dozen cases for the Los Angeles Police Department and the FBI.

The firing triggered an investigation by the Los Angeles public defender's office, which is representing two murder defendants whose cases were handled by Orchid Cellmark analyst Sarah Blair.

Blair has denied any wrongdoing.

"We're going to independently review these cases, and we're obviously going to look at the pending Cellmark cases in a different light," said Jennifer Friedman, the forensic science coordinator for the public defender's office.

Much more care will have to be taken now to ensure the fairness and accuracy of DNA testing generally, Friedman added.

'More Ingenious'

"This suggests that we have to be even more ingenious when we have our experts look at these cases, to let them know that these things can happen and are happening," Friedman said.

Blair also allegedly falsified results in a gang-shooting case charged against Omar Chavez, who is represented by Beverly Hills attorney Ronald Richards.

"The results coming from DNA may be accurate on the scale of 100 billion to 1, but the integrity of the human being doing the testing is far less than that," said Richards. "That sort of information will be very helpful to present to a jury."

Cellmark lab director Robin W. Cotton first disclosed the Blair problem to the LAPD in a Sept. 23 letter.

Los Angeles District Attorney spokeswoman Sandi Gibbons said the department immediately passed the letter to prosecutors, who passed it along to defense attorneys.

Ten Unchanged

Gibbons said none of the affected cases has gone to trial.

It could not be learned whether Blair's involvement tainted any other cases around the state or the nation. Cotton did not return calls to either her work or home phone numbers, and the FBI declined to comment.

Blair had been working on cases for the law enforcement agencies for 10 months, said Friedman, though she had been employed by the firm, reportedly the world's largest DNA lab, for 21½ years.

LAPD Commander Steve Johnson said Cotton had reported that Blair falsified results in 11 of the 27 cases she worked on for the department.

Three of the 11 falsified cases involve men now facing trial on murder charges.

To assure accuracy, analysts at Cellmark tested DNA crime samples along with two controls: one that contained no DNA and one that contained a known DNA fingerprint. If either the empty sample or the known sample came up wrong, the analyst was to throw out the test and start over.

When Blair encountered a testing problem, however, she allegedly took control results from earlier tests and substituted them for the bad outcomes, Friedman said. Johnson, who heads the LAPD's scientific investigation division, said Cellmark has agreed to redo all 27 cases Blair was involved in. Ten of the redone cases have been returned, he said, with no change in the results.

"We don't think there will be any changes in the results," he said. "As long as you have human beings involved, problems can crop up."

Gibbons said the prosecutor's office retains its faith in the lab.

"They really do excellent work," said Gibbons. "They took care of this immediately. My understanding is that this came to their attention on a Friday, looked at it over the weekend, and [fired Blair] that Monday."

The testing affected three current cases in Los Angeles County:

- *People v. Holmes*, BA27844. Prosecutors say Holmes, also known as K-Dog, murdered a rival gang member.
- *People v. Beltran*, LA039740. Beltran is accused of murdering his girlfriend and her two daughters in Sun Valley.
- *People v. Chavez*, NA060511. Chavez is accused of murdering a rival gang member in Long Beach; Quintero is being held on a related weapons charge.

This is the second problem in recent months with lab results in LAPD cases.

In September, officials acknowledged that chemist Jeffrey Lowe made numerous errors in weighing and analyzing evidence at the LAPD's own lab.

In October, Los Angeles County Stephen A. Marcus dismissed a murder charge against Phillip Rawl because prosecutors did not tell his lawyer that Lowe had weighed narcotics incorrectly in 27 cases.

Johnson said Lowe, who was retrained and put back to work, has been monitored closely and has had no further problems.

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