

International Association for Identification



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IAI Position concerning Latent Fingerprint Identification

The International Association for Identification (IAI) is the world's oldest and largest organization of forensic science professionals. Founded in 1915, the IAI represents some 6,900 practitioners in seventy five countries. Among other things, the IAI is committed to: encouraging research in the area of the science of fingerprint identification, advancing the relevant sciences, providing training and education to practitioners and guidance to academia and government on issues concerning forensic science disciplines.

The IAI fully supports the principle that finger, palm, and footprints (friction skin detail) are unique to each and every individual. This principle has been well established through the biological sciences of anatomy, embryology and genetics. These unique anatomical features, which are formed prior to birth are persistent throughout one's life until some time after death; have become the foundation upon which the individualization of a fingerprint to a single person becomes scientifically accepted and legally defensible. Friction skin information has been used internationally to identify and exclude sources of finger, palm, and foot impressions in criminal and civil proceedings by the relevant scientific community for more than a century. The use of the Automated Fingerprint Identification Systems (AFIS) provides additional support for the unique nature of friction skin detail searches. Since the advent of such systems some thirty years ago, hundreds of thousands of computer searches of fingerprint databases have been and continue to be conducted twenty-four hours a day each and every day. As yet, no two fingerprints from different individuals have ever been found to be the same. Additionally, numerous studies have been conducted over the years by the medical research and the forensic science communities, the results of these studies collectively supporting the theory of biological uniqueness and persistence as it is currently applied to the individualization of friction skin. As with all sciences, continued research is not only advisable but mandated for the science to continue its level of acceptance in the scientific and legal arenas. However, the fact that research is ongoing in no way invalidates the past or current practice of the science by those competent professional forensic practitioners who have successfully applied it as a means of identifying perpetrators of crime and exonerating the innocent.

The IAI endorses the position that individuals may be identified as the source of a particular friction skin impression through the correct Analysis, Comparison, Evaluation and Verification (referred

to within the profession as the ACE-V methodology) of the friction skin detail by competent examiners. The IAI acknowledges the concern of some observers who believe, though incorrectly, that the individualization of an unknown friction skin impression to impressions from a known individual is somehow different when comparing impressions representative of the entire finger or palm versus a partial impression. This is a flawed presupposition often cited by those with no practical experience in the fingerprint science, incomplete knowledge of the applied discipline, and or a lack of understanding of the basic principles involved. Qualified examiners know that the process is the same in both instances and the threshold for individualization is dependent on the quality and quantity of information available in and not the size of the unknown impression.

The IAI acknowledges that the practice of the friction skin comparison discipline is not free from error. This opinion is in concurrence with the National Research Council's position on the issue of error rate as described in their assessment of forensic DNA, and believes this to be applicable to the forensic science of fingerprints¹. To propose the argument that the applied methodology (ACE-V method) is unreliable because of such errors is misplaced logic. First, most of these errors may be attributed to the improper application of the methodology, the competence of the examiner or subjective influences. Second, errors are corrected by applying the ACE-V method correctly. One can not claim that a method is unreliable and then rely on the same method to detect and rectify the error. Though an accurate approach to numerically quantifying an error rate for friction skin individualizations has yet to be determined, it is generally held by practitioners, scientists, and legal authorities that the error rate for fingerprint identification is extremely small, statistically insignificant, and not due to the methodology but instead to the inherent risk of error in any human endeavor.

The reliability of any forensic science discipline is best controlled by the adherence to established scientific and quality assurance practices. The IAI acknowledges the existence and importance of standards and guidelines and encourages all agencies and practitioners performing forensic latent print examinations to adhere to these principles. Further, the IAI recognizes the benefits of accreditation and certification for agencies and practitioners. It encourages agencies performing forensic latent print examinations to obtain accreditation and promotes the certification of examiners through the IAI's Certified Latent Print Examiner (CLPE) program. Participation in such programs ensures confidence that the laboratory is practicing sound examinations through adherence to established quality assurance practices.

Fingerprint examiners state their conclusions as a matter of opinion as is the practice with many other forensic disciplines. They are ethically and professionally required to offer their opinions only

¹ ISBN 0-309-05395-1

I. Forensic genetics. I. National Research Council (U.S.).

Committee on DNA Technology in Forensic Science: an Update.

II. National Research Council (U.S.). Commission on DNA Technology in Forensic Science: an Update.

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when they are absolutely confident of their conclusions and in the procedures and methods used in the process. Stating their conclusions with any less certainty or offering an opinion on identity based on general or class characteristics may allow for a misinterpretation of results by juries and judges.

The IAI recognizes that it is a tactic employed by opposing counsel in our judicial system and others who may lack sufficient knowledge, training and experience, to question the reliability of the forensic sciences particularly that of friction skin impression examinations. This is to be expected since it is part of an adversarial judicial system. The objective of these tactics is to misrepresent factual data, offer incomplete or misleading data, or attempt to create confusion. Therefore to clarify the collective opinion of the profession at large concerning the ACE-V methodology and the principles involved in the individualization of friction skin, the following statement is offered:

The International Association for Identification steadfastly supports and promotes the continued and proper application of the science of friction ridge skin individualization.