

Letter to the Editor—Professionalism: Ethics and Scholarship in Forensic Science

Sir,

We would like to state our concerns regarding the practice of professional and ethical scholarship in both the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) (via the annual meeting proceedings) and the *Journal of Forensic Sciences* (JFS), the official journal of the AAFS. As we are all aware, the AAFS is “a professional society dedicated to the application of science and law” (1). To further define the level of professionalism expected of members, the AAFS bylaws embrace a code of ethics and conduct (Article II, Section 1a) that states: “Every member and affiliate of the Academy shall refrain from exercising professional or personal conduct adverse to the best interests and objectives of the Academy. The objectives stated in the Preamble to these bylaws shall be to promote professionalism, integrity, and competency in the membership actions and associated activities...” (2). Additionally, within the AAFS position statement, which was issued in response to the National Academy of Sciences “Forensic Needs” report, it states the AAFS “endorses and promotes [that]...‘Forensic Scientists should be assiduously held to Codes of Ethics’” (3). Therefore, as scientists and professionals within the forensic community, we are obligated to hold ourselves to certain professional and ethical standards.

In particular, we have become increasingly aware that the titles of many AAFS presentations, and to a lesser degree JFS papers, are unprofessional and potentially unethical. The intent of this letter is not meant to question the intellectual merit of the content of the papers published in the JFS or the AAFS proceedings, as we certainly support continued scientific research and scholarly discussion within the field of forensic sciences. Nor do we intend to single out any one author or section. Furthermore, we do not presume that such journal or conference titles were created with the express and deliberate purpose of being disrespectful or unprofessional. In fact, more than likely, the title was merely geared toward garnering more interest and attention in the said work. However, we are concerned with how we portray ourselves as a discipline with titles that not only do not do justice to the material to be presented, but in fact seem to negate their intrinsic value. Therefore, we hold that this lack of professionalism may be a significant problem that we as a society should address, for it is *we* who have the distinct responsibility of continually, consciously, and conscientiously shaping our public image.

Due to these concerns, we explored this practice of using potentially unprofessional titles for scholarly work. We examined the AAFS proceedings from 2002 to 2012 (those which are currently available online via AAFS.org) (Table 1), as well as all issues of JFS from 1972 to 2013 (Table 2) and noted titles that are uninformative or not reflective of the actual work being presented (*improper*), as well as those titles which are disrespectful to the dignity of the person or subject and therefore potentially inflammatory (*unethical*). In Table 3, we provide several examples of titles that we consider to be unprofessional (improper and/or unethical) from each section of the AAFS published in the AAFS proceedings. From our analysis of questionable titles, there is no clear temporal trend in the AAFS proceedings; how-

ever, it does appear that in the JFS there has been a slight decline in the appearance of these titles, which we find to be promising. Our hope is that this trend will continue until no such titles appear in publication. It should be noted that the number of unprofessional titles published in JFS is considerably less than those found in the AAFS proceedings, and because such a small percentage of papers published in the JFS have unprofessional titles, we can assume that this implies that the AAFS proceedings do not require (at least at this time) similar scholarly, formal, or professional standards. This should certainly be seen as a serious problem that merits attention since the AAFS proceedings are in fact published online, and the annual AAFS meetings are attended by not only many different professionals with diverse backgrounds, but also various media sources, and family members.

Professionals, by definition, are understood to be both qualified for work, and ethical in conduct (4). Consequently, as forensic scientists, our work is, and will be scrutinized, not just by our peers, but also by the affected families, and the public at large. Therefore, we must be conscious and cognizant of the implications of our words in describing our research and actions. Titles such as those found in Table 3 actually result in devaluing the scientific research itself (albeit unintentionally), by relegating the research to rather callous, sophomoric advertisement. In the end, this practice of hoping to garner attention through pithy titles does not reflect well on us as a discipline. Furthermore, in a time of increased scrutiny over forensic practices and forensic scientists, we cannot afford to be flippant with the presentation of our work to the scientific community.

There seems to be a popular, unspoken belief that a perceived “catchy” title might result in the journal reviewer or the conference committee giving the paper or abstract an initial look. The concern here is that some have possibly neglected to remember that forensic science is an academic discipline, similar to other academic disciplines that deal with human life and death (e.g., clinical medicine, human rights, bioethics), that must be held to an exceptionally high standard of scholarship which reflects the sensitive, humanitarian mission, and work in which we participate. It should therefore be recognized that those within the forensic science community have a greater responsibility to promote an awareness of human dignity, respect for the person, and professionalism, precisely due to the very nature of the work we do.

In the end, we all must recognize that there is a real danger when working in the forensic sciences: namely, the gradual desensitization, and even *dehumanization*, that may occur when dealing with remains on a regular basis. In fact, one’s speech and even the presence of “morbid humor” could point to one ignoring or losing the awareness of the dignity and respect that human remains, in particular, rightly deserve. This is not to say that this awareness sentences us to a professional life filled with dull, stuffy, and uninteresting scientific conversations and articles within the field, rather such awareness aims to remind us and *sensitize* us to the great and intrinsic humanitarian nature and worth of our profession.

Ultimately, the question the forensic community needs to ask itself is “How, as individuals and as a community, do we want to present ourselves to not only our colleagues, but also others

TABLE 1—Unprofessional titles by section published in AAFS proceedings.

Year	Criminalistics n (%)	Digital and Multimedia Sci. n (%)	Engineering n (%)	General n (%)	Jurisprudence n (%)	Psych. & Behavioral Sci. n (%)	Odontology n (%)	Path/Bio n (%)	Physical Anthropology n (%)	Psych. and Behavioral Sci. n (%)	Questioned Docs n (%)	Toxicology n (%)	Last Word Society n (%)
2012	9/201 (4.5)	3/19 (15.8)	2/47 (4.3)	3/81 (3.7)	2/36 (5.6)	3/47 (6.4)	3/112 (2.7)	2/134 (1.5)	3/112 (2.7)	2/42 (4.8)	0/16 (0.0)	1/46 (2.2)	1/5 (20.0)
2011	2/209 (1.0)	0/21 (0.0)	0/24 (0.0)	4/54 (7.4)	2/47 (4.3)	3/50 (6.0)	1/102 (1.0)	3/136 (2.2)	1/102 (1.0)	4/36 (11.1)	1/27 (3.7)	0/52 (0.0)	1/5 (20.0)
2010	2/207 (1.0)	0/28 (0.0)	0/43 (0.0)	4/73 (5.5)	4/46 (8.7)	1/59 (1.7)	4/130 (3.1)	3/120 (2.5)	4/130 (3.1)	2/25 (8.0)	1/27 (3.7)	0/45 (0.0)	3/8 (37.5)
2009	3/189 (1.6)	0/28 (0.0)	0/19 (0.0)	0/45 (0.0)	2/17 (11.8)	3/38 (7.9)	3/116 (2.6)	1/121 (0.8)	3/116 (2.6)	0/22 (0.0)	0/22 (0.0)	1/58 (1.7)	0/10 (0.0)
2008	0/176 (0.0)	N/A	1/62 (1.6)	3/85 (3.5)	1/12 (8.3)	1/48 (2.1)	0/129 (0.0)	0/101 (0.0)	0/129 (0.0)	1/25 (4.0)	0/28 (0.0)	0/67 (0.0)	1/10 (10.0)
2007	1/206 (0.5)	N/A	1/56 (1.8)	1/68 (1.5)	0/25 (0.0)	2/41 (4.9)	0/109 (0.0)	5/116 (4.3)	0/109 (0.0)	1/28 (3.6)	2/17 (11.8)	1/52 (1.9)	1/10 (10.0)
2006	2/174 (1.1)	N/A	0/37 (0.0)	0/54 (0.0)	1/29 (3.4)	1/46 (2.2)	2/84 (2.4)	1/107 (0.9)	2/84 (2.4)	0/16 (0.0)	1/24 (4.2)	2/52 (3.8)	2/9 (22.2)
2005	2/174 (1.1)	N/A	2/52 (3.8)	3/79 (3.8)	1/19 (5.3)	3/34 (8.8)	1/92 (1.1)	4/105 (3.8)	1/92 (1.1)	1/20 (5.0)	0/21 (0.0)	1/40 (2.5)	4/6 (66.7)
2004	3/172 (1.7)	N/A	5/60 (8.3)	3/64 (4.7)	1/16 (6.3)	2/45 (4.4)	3/106 (2.8)	1/83 (1.2)	3/106 (2.8)	0/18 (0.0)	0/17 (0.0)	1/51 (2.0)	0/7 (0.0)
2003	2/140 (1.4)	N/A	0/39 (0.0)	0/43 (0.0)	0/43 (0.0)	1/50 (2.0)	2/72 (2.8)	0/96 (0.0)	2/72 (2.8)	0/22 (0.0)	0/14 (0.0)	1/37 (2.7)	2/5 (40.0)
2002	3/92 (3.3)	N/A	0/52 (0.0)	1/38 (2.6)	0/22 (0.0)	0/50 (0.0)	2/69 (2.9)	4/81 (4.9)	2/69 (2.9)	0/16 (0.0)	0/21 (0.0)	0/33 (0.0)	1/5 (20.0)
Total	29/1940 (1.5)	3/96 (3.1)	11/497 (2.2)	22/684 (3.2)	14/312 (4.5)	20/508 (3.9)	21/1121 (1.9)	24/1200 (2.0)	21/1121 (1.9)	11/270 (4.1)	5/232 (2.2)	8/533 (1.5)	16/80 (20.0)

TABLE 2—Number of unprofessional titles published in JFS by decade.

	n (%)
1972–1979	7/920 (0.76)
1980–1989	9/1726 (0.52)
1990–1999	6/2158 (0.28)
2000–2009	7/3032 (0.23)
2010–2013	2/1268 (0.16)

TABLE 3—Example of published unprofessional titles by section.

Section	Example Titles
Criminalistics	A Tale of Two Cities: Testing Your Rape Kit Backlog—Two Very Different Approaches
Criminalistics	Chapped, Pale Lips? Just Shimmer!
Digital & Multimedia Sci.	A Mango Bait: A Missing Girl, and a Murder
Digital & Multimedia Sci.	Look Ma! No Wires: Challenged wireless Networking Presents to Investigators
Engineering	Being Significant and Watching Your Figures
Engineering	Finding the Genie in a Bottle
General	From this Day Forward: To Have and to Hold—Spousal Rape of Asian Immigrant wives
General	The Killer Economy
Jurisprudence	Don't Cut Off Your Nose to Spite Your Trace
Jurisprudence	These Tips Don't Lie: Jurors Absorb More Than They Think
Odontology	Bitemark Analysis in an Italian Judicial Case: Dentists—Do They Bite Off More Than They Can Chew
Odontology	The Case of the Frustrating Floater
Pathology/Biology	Goodness gracious Great Balls of Fire: Genital Thermal Injuries From Airbag Exhaust
Pathology/Biology	Suicide by table Saw—A Slice of Interpretation
Physical Anthropology	Bugs Bunny? No Bugs Bunny
Physical Anthropology	Mama Mia! Murder and Disposal of a Corpse in a Pizza Oven
Psych. & Behavioral Sci.	Necrophilic as a morgue Attendant: Paraphilia in the Dead of Night
Psych. & Behavioral Sci.	The Cowl Does Not Make the Monk: A Case of Sexual Abuse Committed by a "bogus priest" on a group of minors
Questioned Documents	"I am 99% Certain That Mr X Wrote This Document!"—An Introduction to Handling Uncertainty in Conclusions
Questioned Documents	When Good Science Goes Bad—the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
Toxicology	An Unusual case of Ethanol/Methanol Poisoning: Or Was It? The Million Dollar Question!
Toxicology	She "Lost that Lovin' Feelin'" in the Arizona Dust: Angry Teen on Alcohol, Cannabis and Cocaine
Last Word Society	The Great White Dope: Was Jim Jeffries Drugged Before his Heavyweight Title Fight With Jack Johnson
Last Word Society	The Vampire of Venice: A Real Ancient Ancestor of Twilight Investigated By Modern Forensics

who may have interest in the issues addressed?" Thus, before submitting a paper to a journal or submitting a proposed conference talk, we would like to recommend the individual(s) ask themselves the following:

- Is the title appropriate and respectful? In other words, is the title both decent and useful to the field, and does it place value on the intrinsic dignity, value, and worth of the subject matter?
- How would a layperson (one not in the forensic field) or family members of the decedent possibly perceive this title?

- Am I presenting myself and my work as a forensic professional? Am I portraying myself and my work as competent, trustworthy, and ethically sound?

Superior scholarship is necessary to maintain the honor, reliability, and reputation of each and every scientific profession (5). The AAFS is the preeminent forum for scientific discussion, continuing education, and professional development for the forensic sciences. Therefore, it is imperative that we recognize the obligation to present our research in a manner that is befitting of such a scientific society. The responsibility of maintaining professional integrity falls on *all* forensic scientists; it is not simply the job of the original authors, but also that of the reviewers, editors, and consumers. For ultimately, improper or unethical practices, whether they be in the laboratory, or in our presentations and writings, affects each of us by weakening our credibility and professional standing, and consequently, such negligent practices directly harm the discipline and profession of forensic science itself.

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