

## 5th International DNA users' conference for investigative officers

Lyon, (France) 14 November 2007

Keynote speech by John Dickinson

**'Why the international exchange of DNA is important'**

Hello my name is John Dickinson. It is an honour to be here today and have the opportunity to address such an important international audience of law enforcement and forensic science specialists. In this respect I would like to thank INTERPOL for making this possible.

I would also like to praise INTERPOL for the achievements made in advancing the sharing of DNA data in serious crime investigation and congratulate all nations who are presently contributing to the INTERPOL DNA Gateway.

My 'claim to fame' is that I am the father of Caroline Dickinson. I am not unhappy about that title, just sad that the reason Caroline and our family gained public attention came out of such terrible tragedy.

In an effort to help you recognise and remember the importance of what I have to say I will concentrate and talk about four individuals. Caroline is the first of those four.

In July 1996, Caroline, aged 13, was one of a party of 42 school children from Launceston College which is situated in the county of Cornwall in the far South West of England. The group went on a 4-day trip to a small town just across the English Channel, in Northern France called Pleine Fourgeres. There they stayed in a Youth Hostel.

Through telephone calls and postcards we know that Caroline had been enjoying this first school visit abroad, but she was never able to tell us in person because on the morning of 18th July 1996 her room-mates found her dead in her sleeping bag in their room. She had been raped and she had been murdered.

This event changed my life and that of my family forever. The process which led to the conviction of the man who murdered Caroline only came to an end in September 2005 when he abandoned his 2nd appeal. That is 9 years during which time, I am sure you will understand, it was impossible for us to carry on with our normal lives.

I do not pretend to have any detailed understanding of the science of DNA but what I want to share with you now are matters which have brought us to this point and the pivotal role the science of DNA played in achieving justice for Caroline. I also want to help others, such as yourselves, to understand just how important it is that this vital investigation procedure is expanded to the benefit of justice, and the safety of the vulnerable.



Keynote speaker John Dickinson urged delegates to maximise the use of INTERPOL's DNA database to help save lives.

I must make it clear that this investigation was conducted mainly in France by the French authorities but the British Devon and Cornwall Police were also heavily involved from the start. This was the case as, following the initial enquiries conducted at the scene, the children and staff returned to the UK at the earliest opportunity, obviously wishing to get back to a more familiar and safe environment.

Over the following months and years the Gendarmerie and the Devon and Cornwall police force undertook various aspects of the investigation as directed by the French Examining Magistrates; of which there were four during the duration the period of the murder investigation. It is important to mention at this point that one of these enquiries led to the identification of a similar incident on the same night as Caroline was murdered in another hostel at St Lunaire, about a 40-minute drive from Pleine Fourgeres, where the offender was disturbed whilst sexually assaulting another 13-year-old English girl from Manchester. She had been asleep in her bed in a dormitory shared with other schoolgirls.

The second individual I wish to mention in my presentation is a man called Patrice Pade. - Within weeks of the murder Pade, a vagrant who had passed through the locality of Pleine Fougères a week earlier, was arrested. I was informed by telephone that he had admitted to Caroline's murder and of course the family were clearly relieved and delighted at this news. However within only a few days I was notified that through the examination of the DNA evidence from the crime scene showed that Pade was not the offender. He had confessed - but his confession was clearly false.

One can only speculate but without DNA it is probable that Pade would have been imprisoned for Caroline's murder and the killer would still be free ... still free to rape and to murder. It also makes one wonder if there are others such as Pade who are presently serving sentences for crimes they did not commit and who could be cleared by DNA evidence.

In 1996 the use of DNA as an investigative tool was in its early days but growing in the UK, with a national database already well established. In France, however, there was no database. In fact when formerly requested to do so by the family the original Investigating Magistrate restricted use of this vital aspect of the case on the grounds of cost.

The second examining magistrate took a totally different view and arranged widespread screening of the males of Pleine Fourgeres and its environs. This effectively eliminated such individuals from the enquiry, giving much relief to the population in the locality. It is important to highlight that the probative value of the DNA found on Caroline was such that this scientific procedure had now cleared not just Patrice Pade but also those under more general suspicion.

This magistrate also directed the further examination of other items from the scene, importantly a wad of cotton-wool which was shown to have Caroline's DNA from her saliva and blood on it. This was vitally important in later proving that the offender had used this cotton wool as a weapon to suffocate her and thus helped prove his intent, as other evidence also showed he had brought it with him to the hostel.

The investigation continued over the ensuing years with various ups and downs but no breakthrough. I was, however, always confident - despite time slipping away - that DNA would eventually lead us like a magnet to the offender.

I also felt it was extremely important to keep the investigation in the public eye and therefore, painful as it often was, I frequently engaged with the media in England and France and made 18 return trips to France as I sought to liaise with the investigating authorities and keep the profile of Caroline's case in the public eye.

By late 2000 little seemed to be happening, although I knew investigators in France and England were still working through lists of individuals they wished to eliminate from the enquiry, but more was needed. Using the fact that British law required a formal Inquest into Caroline's death, the family with help from British and French Investigators again sought to bring the case to public attention. As a result of this hearing in early 2001 the media interest intensified enormously.

Under pressure from the press the latest Examining Magistrate named a leading suspect he sought; the third person in my presentation - Francisco Xavier Arces Montes, a Spaniard then aged 51. As a consequence Montes' name was published in an article in the Sunday Times newspaper in London.

Staff from British Airways flights placed complementary copies of this particular edition from their planes on to their stands at airports throughout the world.

As a consequence the newspaper containing this article was picked up, completely by chance, at Detroit International Airport by a U S Immigration Officer, Tommy Ontko, - the fourth person I wish to mention.

Tommy read the piece over a cup of coffee in his office, and on his own initiative completed a search of US Federal databases, eventually locating a man of this name in custody in Miami Beach, Florida (A distance of 1400 miles/2240 kilometres). He made contact with Miami confirming the identification and then, fighting language and time zone differences he notified the investigating authorities in France.

A swift comparison was sought of the DNA from the scene with that taken from Montes in Miami. This proved positive, but was not without its difficulties. The DNA data sent to the US came from the UK database which differed from that in the United States and France, which in turn also differed from each other. However Gendarmes flew to the US to gain a fresh sample for examination in French laboratories (something Montes attempted to block). Using their criteria again the link was confirmed.

I put it to you that without the intervention and persistence of Tommy Ontko, and in the absence of routine comparison of DNA databases internationally, we would, almost without doubt, still be battling to find Caroline's killer.

Subsequent enquiries showed Montes was responsible for a litany of sexual offences in many different countries going back more than 20 years. These include convictions for multiple rapes in Germany for which he was imprisoned. Following Caroline's murder he had fled back to London and then swiftly returned to Spain where he was arrested for attempted rape at knifepoint for which he skipped bail. This obviously was a missed opportunity to gain his DNA profile and link him to Caroline's murder investigation.

In the face of the evidence presented at his trial, including the cotton-wool found by Caroline's body, Montes eventually admitted being responsible for the sexual attack in St Lunnairé earlier on the same night that Caroline was killed. In fact it is certain that he had actually taken the cotton-wool in question from that dormitory when he fled the St Lunnairé hostel.

The offence for which Montes had been arrested in Miami involved breaking into a youth hostel where he had committed sex offences, the victim again being a young woman asleep in one of the rooms which she shared with friends.

Montes was extradited to France within approximately 6 months of the DNA identification but used various delaying tactics before facing trial in Rennes in June 2004 and subsequently an appeal hearing the following June 2005. The family sat through these trials during which time Montes continued to deny responsibility, seeking to present himself, rather than Caroline, as the victim. There is no doubt that without the proof positive of the DNA evidence he would have admitted nothing. Indeed he would never have stood trial.

It is clear that without DNA evidence Montes would not have been brought to account for killing Caroline. It is also clear that whilst that evidence existed from the start of the investigation in 1996, it was mainly by chance, aided by effective use of the media, which brought about the initial link.

It should not be a matter of luck or chance that an identified suspect, such as Montes, is positively linked to a crime due to the diligence of one individual who just happened to pick up a newspaper. The probative value of DNA evidence, dependent upon the circumstances, is such that its exchange across international boundaries should make it a matter of routine.

The truth though is that individuals such as Montes are not a problem for French Gendarmes, or British Bobbies or American Cops – they are a problem, and indeed a danger to us all.

Montes is a serial sex offender who has continually exploited international borders to gain his ends; he and others like him know the gaps in the system and survive by slipping through them.

As DNA grows as a tool in investigations individuals, such as Montes, are bound to focus their predatory activity in geographic areas and countries where the use of the powerful evidence of DNA is not the routine, or where there is actually no DNA database in place at all.

I have addressed the question “Why the International Exchange of DNA is important” from a very personal perspective but I would hope that the case for moving from the random to the routine has been made clear.

My daughter Caroline was of course the principal victim, but without DNA science the second person in my narrative, Patrice Pade, an innocent man, also became a victim and could now be serving a life sentence. The third, Montes, could well have escaped justice. I and the rest of my family, Caroline’s friends, including those with her on that fateful trip to France, would probably still be left wondering and worrying. Whilst DNA did not and cannot bring Caroline back it has delivered the justice we sought on her behalf, and allowed some form of resolution for the family.

The fourth person I mentioned was Tommy Ontko, a hero to me and to my family, but ‘Tommys’ are not always going to appear and help resolve crimes. That is why a structured and ongoing international exchange of DNA data (such as is now possible through the INTERPOL DNA Gateway) is so important, and why time is of the essence in widening such a database to maximise its potential, and crucially help save lives.

As I sincerely thank you all for allowing me to speak to you today, I trust that you will go from here convinced of the need to cooperate in the exchange of DNA data internationally - but with a dependence upon a system such as the INTERPOL DNA Gateway, and not an individual, even someone like Tommy.

Thank you.