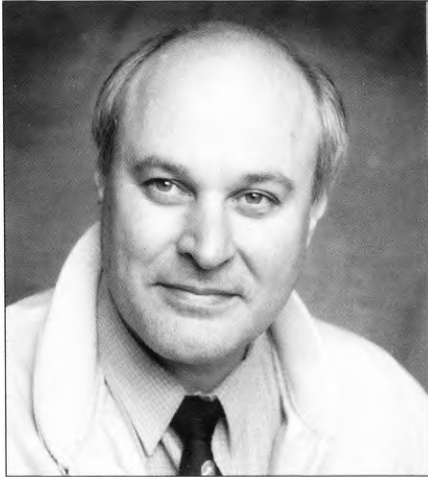


Churchill Fellowship award could help to revive the 'art' of trace evidence examination



Federal Agent Peter Nelipa

Federal Agent Peter Nelipa of Forensic Services was awarded a Churchill Fellowship for 1997 recently.

The fellowships, awarded by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, are designed to provide opportunities for overseas study to benefit the Australian community.

Mr Nelipa will study crime scene management strategies, evidence collection techniques and post-scene evidence examination in Israel, USA, Germany, the UK and Russia.

The locations he will visit have very high crime rates compared to those in Canberra and each has a different approach to forensic investigation. Mr Nelipa will spend 10 weeks studying the approaches and submit a report to the Churchill Trust at the end of the tour.

While a few Churchill Fellowships have been awarded to police who have specialised in crime scene examination in the past, none has been concerned directly with 'hands-on' forensic investigation. Previous fellowships have concentrated mostly on administrative requirements such as training, personnel and equipment. Mr Nelipa will observe what happens from the moment the first call is received advising that a scene

examination is required. He will concentrate on major incidents.

In explaining the rationale behind the study Mr Nelipa said: "There are many times when an investigator has no suspects and where there are no witnesses to a crime. Nevertheless, in these cases it remains a certainty that there will always be a variety of physical evidence present at the scene, as long as that scene remains undisturbed.

"It has long been thought, however, that up to 80 per cent of such evidence is never routinely found. The reason for this is that most of this evidence is not normally visible to the unaided eye.

"This is significant from an investigative point of view as physical evidence that cannot be seen by the crime scenes examiner, likewise cannot be seen by the offender. While the offender is not aware that such evidence exists, it is unlikely that he or she will attempt to destroy it. All the scene examiner needs to do is know how to find it and understand it for what it is, so that it can in turn be examined by the appropriate forensic expert. Such evidence, if significant, can assist to link, or even identify the offender involved. With advances in forensic biology, forensic chemistry and indeed all other forensic disciplines today, much of this trace matter can be successfully analysed and more information gleaned from it than ever before.

"My special interest lies in appreciating the potential of all available physical evidence, irrespective of its size. Such appreciation includes appropriate consideration to secondary scenes such as those associated with a suspect, a suspect's vehicle, a suspect's home and working environment. I am convinced that consideration to trace evidence can often provide the key to the successful resolution of a difficult

investigation. This is especially so where a high degree of violence has been an element of the crime. But before proper attention can be given to trace matter, the crime scene must be managed properly. Proper regard must be given to crime scene security. An appropriate collection technique, such as vacuuming or tape lifting needs to be employed to collect matter that, although not visible at the time, is likely to be present in the areas examined. In this regard, a number of overseas crime scene examiners have developed their own effective scene management systems, evidence collection and evidence examination techniques.

"Having said that, the examination of trace material is usually highly labour intensive and can require many hours spent under a search microscope. Nevertheless, it can also be highly productive. Such examination is not always suitable for many of the routine offences, but it ought to be used for all those major incidents which demand the highest level of investigative effort.

"Trace evidence examination in Australia is certainly not new; it was successfully undertaken by the NSW Police in the kidnapping and murder of Graham Thorne some 40 years ago. Similar investigative methodology has successfully been used by South Australia Police for years.

"Unfortunately, with the retirement or transfer of a few key personnel the 'art' of trace evidence examination is now all but lost in Australia. Forensic examination tends to concentrate on the obvious exhibits, and at times these are not enough. I am therefore looking forward to undertaking my study in the hope that as a result I, and others in my profession will attempt to do something useful with the other 80 per cent."