

4. Kloster R, Engelskjøn T. Sudden unexpected death in epilepsy (SUDEP): a clinical perspective and a search for risk factors. *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 1999;67:439-44.

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### Author's Response

Sir:

I thank Drs. May and Schnabel for drawing our attention to work recently published in the neurological literature that has important ramifications for the practice of forensic pathology. Drs. May and Schnabel go on to distill the practical point of interpreting post-mortem anticonvulsant levels by saying that "It should be kept in mind that the individual therapeutic serum level may differ from the recommended therapeutic range and that the evaluation of serum levels should primarily depend on the clinical condition of the patient and not on the therapeutic ranges." We had hoped to make just this point in our article in the final paragraph of the Discussion. However the point is made, it is an important one. Ideally, a forensic pathologist will be able to discuss a specific case with the decedent's personal physician, thereby learning what was an effective therapeutic concentration in that particular individual.

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### Commentary on the American Board of Criminalistics (ABC) Certification Process

Sir:

In the ABC Certification News (Volume 6, Issue 1, Summer 1999), we were notified that another route of certification was being implemented for Technical Specialists in Drug Analysis and Molecular Biology. The following letter was sent to the ABC Board of Directors & Examinations Committee on August 06, 1999. The opinions expressed in the letter may be of interest to the forensic science community.

Re: Technical Specialists—Drug Analysis, Molecular Biology

The American Board of Criminalistics (ABC) is a professional organization that "was formed by a majority of the nation's forensic science associations to establish a certification process." (1). This certification is defined as "a voluntary process of peer review by which a practitioner is recognized for attaining the professional qualifications necessary to practice in one or more disciplines of

criminalistics" (1). Nowhere in the purpose or definition of the certification process is there mention of certifying individuals whose nature of work is "Drug Analysis" or "Molecular Biology" in the absence of demonstration of competency in criminalistics. The ABC certification process does not include professional certification of "Technical Specialist—Drug Analysis" and "Technical Specialist—Molecular Biology."

As mentioned in the American Board of Criminalistics Certification Program document, the California Association of Criminalists (CAC) developed a program, which "recognized that the changing nature of the work required increasing specialization, but maintained a strong commitment to a solid foundation in the full range of criminalistics" (2). Since the incorporation of the American Board of Criminalistics in 1989, this organization "has seen basic knowledge of other forensic disciplines, as measured by a General Knowledge Examination, as essential to a certification program."

These statements indicate that a knowledge of criminalistics of a certified member is both important and essential. In fact, there was a need for the testing of the candidate's knowledge to be standardized. As such, the "ABC was incorporated in 1989 in response to a need perceived by many criminalists for a national certification program."

With the development of new scientific techniques and procedures for physical evidence analysis, there must necessarily be changes in the operation of the laboratories where the analyses are performed. The trend in most forensic laboratories is toward increased specialization and away from the generalist or "holistic" approach to problem solving.

Admittedly, increased specialization necessitates that forensic laboratories hire individuals with precisely defined skills. Many of these individuals do not have a sufficient understanding of the basic principles of criminalistics. Often, however, laboratories confer the title of "criminalist" upon these technical specialists. A technical specialist does not become a criminalist by virtue of a title or by working in a forensic laboratory but rather by the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA's) needed to be a criminalist. Criminalistics is "concerned with the recognition, identification, individualization, and evaluation of physical evidence using the methods of the natural sciences in matters of legal significance" (3). Thus, it is a science that draws on many disciplines. Technical specialists who work within a forensic environment can be exposed to many different disciplines during physical evidence analysis. Regardless of the specialization that practitioners engage in, the ABC "supports the philosophy that forensic scientists must have this broad understanding of many aspects of forensic science"(2). It is through the General Knowledge Examination (GKE) that this broad understanding is tested. To further this argument, the Certification Program Structure embodies a four concept approach whose second concept is "a general understanding of a field is needed before specializing." The GKE tests four subject areas, of which not any one subject area is more significant than another (4).

In a Certification News publication (Volume 6, Issue 1, Summer 1999), we were astounded to find that the ABC is assuming the responsibility of certification of Technical Specialists. The newsletter states that "these practitioners find themselves serving as specialists" and "many of these specialists may have little or no formal interactions with case investigators, and/or the nature of the samples provided for examination"(5). Paradoxically, the article also mentions "that all practitioners in any laboratory with the name "forensic" in its title should be expected to pursue opportunities to gain a well-rounded competence in understanding and managing multidisciplinary casework"(5).