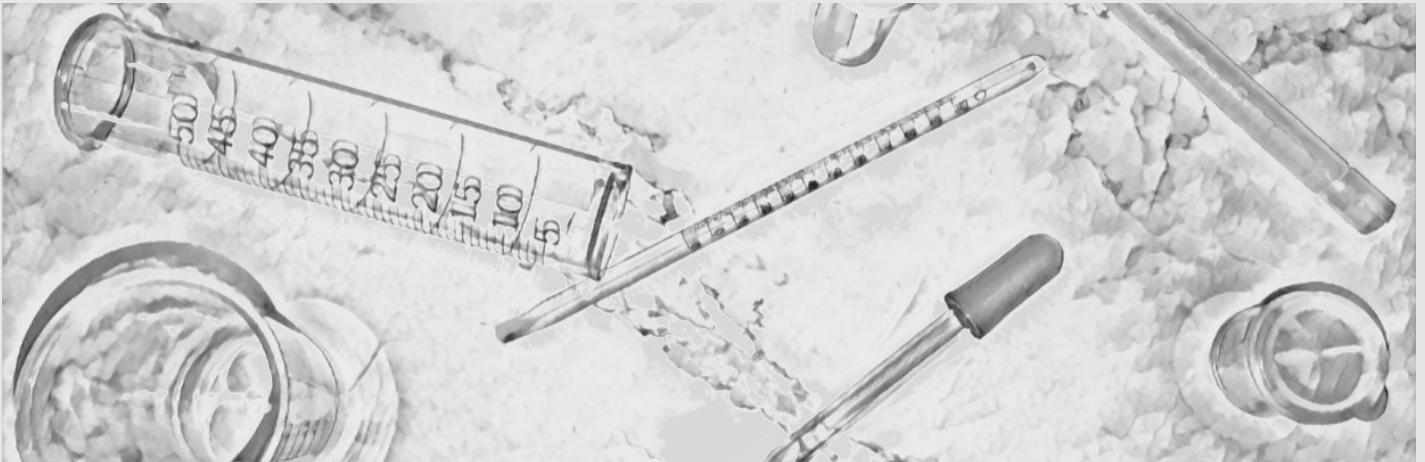


INTEGRITY

The Center for Integrity in Forensic Sciences Newsletter



Cases

Stephanie Spurgeon awaits a new trial yet to be set. In the mean time she is out on bond and home with her family in Florida.

Amicus Briefs

CIFS filed an amicus brief to the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts on behalf of Cara Rintala. Cara was convicted of her wife's 2010 in murder 2016, after two trials with hung juries. At the third trial, the prosecution focused on paint found at the crime scene and created a series of tests that purported to establish time of death. This is the only case we know of where a paint expert opined about drying time. Forensic testing developed specifically for one case lacks the safeguards in place for other disciplines, and we fear Cara was a victim of the resulting injustice. Read more on these issues in this case on the next page.

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Science in the News

Cara and her wife, Annamarie, resided in Granby Massachusetts, in a small, tight knit community. They had a young daughter together and were both EMTs.

One day, Cara and their daughter came home from errands and couldn't find Annamarie in the home. Cara then realized the basement light was on and went to check for her. What Cara found was Annamarie, lifeless, at the bottom of the stairs, covered in paint. Their daughter asked if "momma" was down there.

Cara quickly took her daughter and their dog to the neighbors house and told him to call 911. She ran back to Annamarie and held her until police arrived.

Cara was eventually charged with the strangulation murder of her wife. She was tried three times; the first two trials ended in hung juries. At the third trial, she was convicted. At the third trial, the prosecution included testimony from Robert Guilianelli, an engineer working for the company that manufactured the paint found on Annamarie's body. Guilianelli's testimony was used to establish Annamarie's time of death with more specificity than the medical experts. He testified about the drying time of the paint based on its color and appearance reported by police at the scene. He also speculated about whether the paint was intentionally poured in the basement or spilled during the struggle. Jurors from the third trial later said this evidence led them to convict Cara of murdering Annamarie. CIFS is not aware of other cases in which the drying time of pools of paint were used to establish time of death, and, more importantly, not aware of any uniform standards or guidance for the use of this type of evidence in courts.

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People



Ahmad Askar joined CIFS as a board member in 2021. Prior to this he had worked for CIFS as a volunteer creating video content and managing our YouTube channel. From Ahmad- "I'm a law student and a Video Production Manager at a healthcare technology company in San Jose, California. My knowledge and skills are based strongly in telling stories through visual mediums including videos and graphics. After graduating and passing the bar, I hope to advocate for those in most need of legal assistance, helping them to tell their side of the story in their legal challenges."

Science in the News

Continued from page 2

Guilianelli's testimony was based on a series of experiments he created. These experiments did not follow the scientific method, did not properly address humidity, materials at the scene, thickness, temperature, lighting, weather or other potential variables, and did not take into account important facts about the scene or the case. Worse, he simply speculated (with no testing at all) about whether the paint was spilled or poured and testified about this speculation to the jury.

Even established forensic science disciplines do not have adequate safeguards against injustice, but testimony like the paint testimony in Cara's case--that lacks *any* safeguards-- is especially prone to error.

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Those of us who are concerned with forensic science error often think about fingerprints, bite marks, or DNA when we think about forensic science evidence. While every type of forensic science evidence can have error, and many types (with the exception certain types of DNA evidence) have an inadequate

scientific foundation, sometimes courts hear evidence that is even worse, evidence that lacks even the insufficient safeguards associated with more traditional forensics. This can include testimony like what we've detailed above, or other types of "one-off" testing. These topics are less often in the spotlight, but they're even more problematic.