

Forensic Samples

by

Marie Swain



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INTRODUCTION

This Briefing Paper is concerned with the proposed amendment to s353A of the New South Wales Crimes Act 1900 which will widen the investigatory powers of police to permit forensic samples to be taken from an accused without consent. The first section examines the current situation under the Crimes Act 1900. The following section outlines the provisons of the Criminal Legislation (Amendment) Bill 1995. The third section looks at other legislation both in Australia and overseas which has similar provisions. Arguments in support of the proposal and those against it are outlined in section four.

1 CURRENT SITUATION UNDER THE NSW CRIMES ACT 1900

Section 353A(2) allows for a person who has been charged with a criminal offence and who is in custody to be medically examined if a police officer has reasonable grounds for believing that a medical examination will provide evidence of that offence. There are a number of elements which need to be made out for this section to be operative.

These are: the person to be examined needs to be in lawful custody; a criminal charge needs to have been laid; the police officer who orders the medical examination must be of or above the rank of sergeant; this officer must have reasonable grounds for believing such an examination will provide evidence of the offence with which the accused has been charged; and the examination must be carried out by a legally qualified medical practitioner.

These elements are retained under the proposed changes to section 353A.

However the fundamental question of what constitutes a 'medical examination' for the purposes of this section, is clarified by the proposed amendments. Until recently this section was seen as being capable of a broad interpretation, which would permit forensic material such as blood samples to be taken. Differing views on whether this is indeed the case have been offered.

In R v Hass ¹ a police officer had taken swabs and fingernail scrapings pursuant to s353A and this was held to be lawful and in R v McPhail ² Lee CJ referred to s353A and said that it was plain that the sectiion gives an officer a very wide discretion as to whether particulars of identification can be required and that recently blood, hair and semen samples have become a feature of identification of persons charged with offences.³ However a contrary view was expressed by Lee J in June

¹ (1972) 1 NSWLR 589.

² (1988) 36 A Crim R 390.

³ Trevor Nyman in a paper entitled 'DNA Profiling - Legal Aspects' which was presented at a seminar run by the Continuing Legal Education Department of the College of Law, in Sydney on 26 March 1991, 91/24 at page 8.

1990 when he was sitting as the Royal Commissioner into the Blackburn affair. He said:

...I am of the opinion however that notwithstanding the cases decided on statutes in other States dealing with the subject matter of medical examinations and taking blood, the provisions of s353A of the Crimes Act 1900, as they are at present, would not permit the taking of blood in a syringe and that the investigating police cannot be criticized for declining to use force to take blood.⁴

The Fernando case

In the majority decision handed down by the Court of Appeal earlier this year in the *Fernando* case, it was held that the taking of blood samples or other forensic material was outside the scope of section 353A(2). In the view of the majority judges such action goes further than what would be done in a medical examination.

Priestley JA said:

... an examination of the person of someone in custody as permitted by subsection (2) would permit an external examination involving an examination by eye and by touch. The words of subsection (2) do not suggest to me an intention to make lawful the taking of some part of the body itself.⁵

In the *Fernando* case, two cousins had been arrested and charged with the murder of a nurse at Walgett on 9 December 1994. They were asked to provide blood samples and bodily fluids but refused. The matter went first to the Supreme Court where the police were arguing that they could require such samples as part of the 'examination of a person' under s353A(2). Counsel for the defendants argued that this section did not permit the police to obtain these samples without the defendants' consent. To proceed without consent, it was said, would constitute an assault. Justice Dunford dismissed the Fernandos' application on 16 December 1994 and they commenced proceedings in the Court of Appeal later that same day.⁶ As stated above the Court of Appeal dismissed Dunford J's findings and upheld the Fernandos' appeal.

Priestley JA also made the point that without express statutory authority to take forensic samples, such action would technically constitute an assault upon the person in custody. A clear example of where this statutory authority has been provided is the 1987 amendment to the NSW *Motor Traffic Act 1909*. Section 5AA(4) allows police, once a person has been arrested in relation to a drink driving matter, to

⁴ Cited by Priestley JA in Fernando & Anor v Commissioner of Police & Anor Court of Appeal 29 March 1995, unreported judgment, p25.

⁵ Priestley JA, ibid, p6.

Cindy Wockner, 'Blood tests denied', Telegraph Mirror, 29 March 1995.

require the arrested person to provide samples of blood and urine, whether or not the person consents to them being taken, in accordance with the directions of a medical practitioner.

In addition is was stated in *Fernando* that courts are wary of interpreting statutes in such a way that 'fundamental rights' (such as the right to bodily integrity in this situation) could be done away with unless this intention of the legislature is clearly manifested by unmistakable and unambiguous language.⁷

The Criminal Legislation Further Amendment Bill 1995 introduced and read a second time by the Hon JW Shaw, QC, Attorney-General and Minister for Industrial Relations on 1 June 1995,⁸ is aimed at overcoming the deficiencies identified by the Court of Appeal. The former Attorney-General and Minister for Justice had foreshadowed similar amendments following the decision in Fernando.⁹

2 PROVISIONS OF THE CRIMINAL LEGISLATION (AMENDMENT) BILL 1995

The amendments proposed under this Bill are:

- to permit samples of blood, saliva and hair of a person in lawful custody to be taken as part of a medical examination carried out in accordance with s353A(2);
- however these samples are only to be used in proceedings related to the crime or offence for which they were taken;
- the samples are to be destroyed as soon as practicable after the conclusion of the proceedings;
- being in lawful custody is not limited to being in a police station. If a person is in some other place but is considered to be in lawful custody, the person in charge of that place has the same powers as the police would under this section;
- samples may be taken without the consent of the person in lawful custody.

⁷ Fernando, op.cit., pp9-10.

⁸ <u>NSWPD</u>, Legislative Council, 1 June 1995, p31.

⁹ Media Release, the Hon JP Hannaford, 'Crown examines High Court appeal on blood sampling case', 29 March 1995.

3 RELATED LEGISLATION

(i) Australia

While this Bill has been introduced in direct response to the *Fernando* decision, two other relevant factors should be mentioned.

Crimes Legislation (Further Amendment) Bill 1990

A number of similar provisions were contained in an earlier Bill, the *Crimes Legislation (Further Amendment) Bill 1990*, introduced by the then Attorney-General, the Hon J Dowd.¹⁰ This Bill contained detailed provisions relating to 'intimate examinations' and 'non-intimate examinations' and set out the circumstances in which these could occur. An 'intimate examination' would have required 'appropriate consent in writing' or an order made by an authorised justice; a 'non-intimate examination' could be made with the same appropriate consent in writing or in the absence of such consent, if authorised by a police officer of or above the rank of sergeant.

Although the Bill passed through all stages in the Legislative Assembly it lapsed in June 1990. It was reactivated in March 1991 but again did not proceed.¹¹

Model Bill for Forensic Procedures

The Model Criminal Code Officers Committee (MCCOC) has prepared a Model Bill for Forensic Procedures as part of the package to achieve federal and uniform criminal legislation. In essence this Bill would allow federal police officers greater latitude in taking forensic samples from people suspected of crime. It would be possible under this Bill to take samples where consent was withheld and prior to a person being arrested and charged.¹² In January 1995 the MCCOC circulated an amended Bill reflecting 'the preferred position of the Commonwealth' with final submissions to be made by 3 February 1995. The ultimate form of the Bill will be determined by the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General later this year.¹³

¹⁰ NSWPD, Legislative Assembly, 8 May 1990, p2532.

¹¹ The provisions of this Bill are discussed in the Bills Digest 'Crimes (Detention After Arrest) Amendment Bill 1994 by Gareth Griffith, No 025/94. This Bill passed through all stages in the Legislative Council but did not progress further than the second reading stage in the Legislative Assembly. The restriction in the Crimes Legislation (Further Amendment) Bill 1990 that medical examinations could only be carried out after the person has been charged would have been set aside by the Crimes (Detention After Arrest) Amendment Bill 1994.

¹² Natasha Bita, 'Forced blood tests plan', The Australian, 9 January 1995.

¹³ Bev Schurr, 'Contemporary Comment - Forensic Procedures - An Update', Criminal Law Journal, Vol 19, pp87-89.

Other jurisdictions

All jurisdictions within Australia have legislative provisions in place which permit, to a greater or lesser degree, forensic samples to be taken.¹⁴ However only the Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria make specific reference to taking of genetic material. The remaining legislation uses wording similar to that used in the NSW Crimes Act section 353A.

Some of the more notable features of the specific legislation are:

- In the Victorian legislation there is explicit power for the compulsory taking of blood samples from persons in custody Sections 464S to 464ZD. Both intimate and non-intimate sampling are permitted.
- The Tasmanian legislation differentiates between intimate body sampling in relation to the offence with which the person in custody has been charged and in relation to other offences with which the police believe him or her to have been involved Sections 6 and 7. Consent of a magistrate is required for the second category.
- Section 145 of the Northern Territory legislation gives the widest powers in Australia for police to compel intimate body sampling. Northern Territory legislation also allows police to arrest a person for one offence and then, of right, compel the giving of blood or other samples in relation to their suspicions of the commission of another offence.
- Nowhere can police officers force members of the public of whom they are suspicious to provide such samples.¹⁵

(ii) United Kingdom

Similar issues are addressed in the United Kingdom in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE). However certain differences exist.

Under this Act:

• samples can be taken from a person in police detention. Unlike the current Australian position it is not necessary to have arrested and charged the person before such action can be taken. All that is required is that there is a

¹⁴ NT - Police Administration Act 1978 - Section 145(3); Qld - Criminal Code Act 1989 - Section 259; Tas - Criminal Process (Identification and Search Procedures) Act 1976 - Section 6(5); Vic - Crimes Act 1958 - Sections 464 - 464ZJ. However SA - Summary Offences Act - 1953 - Section 81; WA - The Criminal Code - Section 236 and the ACT Crimes Act 1900 - Section 353A are all in similar terms to that of NSW.

¹⁵ These last three points were made by Ian Freckleton in 'DNA Profiling: Forensic Science under the Microscope', in DNA and Criminal Justice, Conference proceedings edited by Julia Vernon and Ben Selinger, Australian Institute of Criminology, held on 30-31 October 1989.

reasonable belief that the sample will tend to confirm or disprove involvement. While it is true that this may facilitate a person being found guilty if the samples match, it is also the case that a person's noninvolvement will be ascertained more quickly.

• both intimate and non-intimate samples can be taken from a person in police detention where there is authorisation by an officer of at least the rank of superintendent and with the consent of the suspect. Reasonable grounds must exist for the authorisation and both it and the relevant consent must be furnished in writing.

- non-intimate samples are defined in the Act and include hair other than pubic hair, sample taken from a nail or under a nail, a swab from any part of a person's body other than a body orifice. These can be taken without consent.
- intimate samples are defined in the Act and include blood, semen, saliva and pubic hair. Such samples (other than urine or saliva) may only be taken by a registered medical practitioner.
- however a request to a suspect for samples has to be accompanied by a form of caution under the Code of Practice for Identification of Persons by Police Officers. The suspect is told that he or she can refuse to provide the samples. However if refusal occurs, the request and refusal will be given in evidence at his or her trial and that an adverse inference will follow. Statistics show that very few suspects in the UK refuse.¹⁶

Some argue that if a similar provision is incorporated into the NSW legislation it would obviate the need for force to be used to compel a suspect to provide forensic samples.¹⁷ It would be a matter for the accused to weigh up the cost of providing the samples and the cost of not providing them and having an adverse inference follow. Civil liberties groups are not in favour of this proposal as they see the choice presented to a suspect as being 'coercive' rather than a choice freely made.

4 ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST THE INTRODUCTION OF SUCH MEASURES

(i) Arguments for

The essential arguments put forward when the Criminal Legislation (Further Amendment) Bill 1990 was introduced and in support of the Model Bill for Forensic Procedures, apply equally in this case.

¹⁶ These points from a paper 'A view from the Bench' presented by John Phillips a Judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria at the DNA and Criminal Justice Conference, op.cit., pp17-26.

¹⁷ Steve Ireland, 'What authority should police have to detain suspects to take samples', Police Planning and Evaluation Branch NSW, DNA and Criminal Justice Conference, p77.

These are:

- having increased flexibility to investigate would greatly assist police in expediting inquiries;
- samples would only be taken from those who police already had grounds for reasonably believing were involved in a particular offence and who had, on this basis, been arrested and charged;
- early elimination of suspects would enable police to concentrate their resources on appropriate suspects;
- early elimination would spare suspects the anxiety of prolonged investigation and court proceedings;
- it would help reduce court delay if suspects are identified early on in the proceedings;
- police practice and criminal justice should keep pace with scientific and technological advances.
- these measures help balance the civil liberties of the individual with the requirement for the police to have adequate investigative powers.¹⁸

(ii) Arguments against

At a general level concerns of a civil libertarian nature have been expressed regarding all of the proposals mentioned in the paragraph above. In relation to the Model Bill for Forensic Procedures, the Chairman of the NSW Privacy Committee has said:

The difficulties that we have with this Bill have been that there is a general principle about intruding into people's bodies without their consent. Once the State starts to legislate so that your own physical body can be penetrated or invaded by the authority of the State then I think you get in to some very difficult areas.¹⁹

The introduction of these measures is seen as:

- a breach of the right to privacy;
- a denial of the presumption of innocence;

19 Ibid..

¹⁸ Hon Duncan Kerr, Federal Minister for Justice, in an article by Janet Fife-Yeomans, 'Bodies of Evidence', *The Australian*, 30 January 1995.

- a breach of the privilege against self-incrimination (although it would seem firmly established that this only applies in respect of oral evidence given by an accused and not to tangible or real evidence such as blood samples and the like)²⁰;
- even if privilege against self-incrimination cannot be relied upon, there is still a fundamental principle in our legal system that the prosecution has to prove its case;
- such measures could constitute a breach of Australia's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to ensure that persons under arrest are treated with humanity and with respect for human dignity, and to ensure that they are not subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment;
- lack of safeguards in the Bill;
 - there is no right to challenge the taking of forensic samples in court;
 - the accused does not have a right to call or cross-examine witnesses;
 - the degree of force which can be used in taking a sample when consent has not been given is not defined;
 - there are no accountability measures to ensure that police do not abuse these extended powers²¹;
 - different procedures and guidelines should be in place for the taking of intimate and non-intimate samples; and
 - although Section 353AA of the current legislation deals with photographing and fingerprinting children under 14 years of age, no special provision seems to be made in relation to juveniles regarding the taking of bodily samples. Likewise no mention is made of how these amendments may impact on people with an intellectual disability or people of non-English speaking background who may experience linguistic or cultural difficulties.

²⁰ R v Carr (1972) 1 NSWLR 608.

For example, Sections 55(14-16) of PACE require the police annual report to contain information on intimate searches including: the total number of searches; the number of searches conducted by way of examination by a suitably qualified person; the number of searches not so conducted but conducted in the presence of such a person and the result of the searches carried out. Bev Schurr, op.cit., p36.

Other concerns are:

- the ethical problems doctors may face if asked to conduct non-consensual medical procedures on suspects for a purpose other than the interests of their health.²²
- while it is now accepted that the reliability of the actual scientific evidence itself is probably beyond doubt, there is still room for human error to occur in the procedural aspects of collecting and storing samples. Standardised laboratory procedures should be put in place.
- unlike certain other jurisdictions, there is no provision for the accused to choose his or her own medical practitioner, as provided for, for example, by Section 81 of the South Australian Summary Offences Act;
- the provisions apply to a person in 'lawful custody' and although this term has been defined to apply to places other than a police station the exact scope of the phrase is unclear. Moreover it would appear that forensic samples could be taken at any point during the time in which a person is in lawful custody - from arrest up until the day before trial. The effect of this wording potentially means that anyone in lawful custody, when this amendment is passed, could be subject to having forensic samples taken from them.

5 CONCLUSION

It is beyond doubt that advances in science and technology should be utilised to ensure that the criminal justice system operates as efficiently and effectively as possible and that processes which facilitate the dispensation of justice and help to reduce court delays should be encouraged. It is equally important to ensure that individual civil rights and liberties are not sacrificed unnecessarily. To this end it is important for safeguards to be in place and for the balance between the competing interests to be found when legislating in areas such as this.

²² Neil McLeod, 'Legal impediments to a national DNA databank', Australian Journal of Forensic Sciences, Vol 23 No 3 & 4, 1991, pp21-28.



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