

Turning a Blind Eye to Misleading Scientific Testimony: Failure of Procedural Safeguards in a Capital Case

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Abstract

In September 1999, Robin Lovitt was convicted and sentenced to death for the murder of a pool hall manager in Arlington, Virginia. The DNA evidence that was a key part of the government's case was presented in a misleading and unfair manner. In this case study, we first examine the way in which DNA evidence was misused. We then discuss the failure of the legal system at all levels to recognize and remedy this problem. Our goal is to explain how a system that supposedly leaves no stone unturned in capital trials managed to miss or ignore a crucial problem with the scientific evidence that supported the conviction. We argue that the Lovitt case is indicative of systemic problems with the use of scientific evidence that could affect the fairness of criminal trials nationwide and we suggest legal and institutional reforms that may help minimize the risk of similar problems in the future.

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Introduction

Television dramas like the popular “CSI” series have highlighted the importance of forensic science in criminal investigations. These programs show forensic scientists solving crimes with unerring accuracy by examining and drawing conclusions from physical evidence. Ironically, while television has been glorifying crime labs, there has been growing skepticism about some of the claims that forensic scientists have been making in court.¹ For example, an article in the prominent journal *Science* argued that many areas of the “forensic identification sciences” are “underresearched and oversold.”² Instances in which forensic scientists have used shoddy methods, interpreted their results carelessly and presented findings in a misleading manner have been widely documented.³

Concerns about problematic forensic evidence are supported by studies that look at the causes of false convictions. While eyewitness error is widely recognized as the leading cause, a recent review of 86 cases in which convicted defendants were exonerated

¹ See e.g., Simon A. Cole, *More Than Zero: Accounting for Error in Latent Fingerprint Identification*, 95 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOL. 985 (2005)(questioning validity and accuracy of fingerprint identification); Adina Schwartz, *A Systemic Challenge to the Reliability and Admissibility of Firearms and Toolmark Identification* 6 COLUMBIA SCI. & TECH. L.REV., 1 (2005)(questioning validity of toolmark identification); L.C. Hartfield, *Daubert/Kumho challenges to handwriting analysis*. 26 THE CHAMPION 24 (2002); E.J. Imwinkelried & W.A.Tobin, *Comparative bullet lead analysis (CBLA) evidence: Valid inference or ipse dixit?* 28 OKLA. CITY .L. REV. 43 (2003); Saks, M. J. (2000). *Banishing ipse dixit: The impact of Kumho Tire on forensic identification science*. 57 WASH. & LEE L. REV. 879 (2000); C.A. Stafford Smith & P. D. Goodman, *Forensic hair comparison analysis: Nineteenth century science or twentieth century snake oil?*

² Michael J. Saks & Jonathan J. Koehler, *The coming paradigm shift in forensic identification science*. SCIENCE, 309, 892-95

³ See, Paul C. Giannelli, *The Abuse Of Scientific Evidence In Criminal Cases: The Need For Independent Crime Laboratories*, (1997) 4 VA. J. SOC POL'Y&L.439, 441; John Kelly and Phillip Wearne, *Tainting Evidence: Inside the Scandals at the F.B.I. Crime Lab* (Free Press 1998); Craig Cooley, *Reforming the Forensic Science Community To Avert The Ultimate Injustice*, 15 STAN. L. & POLICY REV. 381, 396-397 (2004); William Thompson, *Tarnish on the “Gold Standard”*: *Understanding recent problems in forensic DNA testing*. 30 THE CHAMPION, 10-16 (2006)(hereafter “Tarnish”). See also materials found at the following websites: www.hpdlabinvestigation.org (materials on Houston crime laboratory scandal); www.usdoj.gov/oig/special/9704a/ (materials on the FBI crime lab scandal); www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/english/about/pubs/morin/ (materials on the Canadian scandal surrounding the false conviction of Guy Paul Morin); www.scientific.org (materials on DNA testing problems in Houston, Virginia); www.corpus-delicti.com/forensic_fraud.html (an archive of news articles on fraudulent forensic science); www.truthinjustice.org/junk.htm (materials on forensic error and fraud); pdxnorml.org/LABSCAM.html (same).

by DNA evidence found that bad forensic science was a close second.⁴ Eyewitness errors were a factor in 71% of these cases, but “forensic science testing errors” occurred in 63% of the cases and “false or misleading testimony by forensic scientists” occurred in 27% of the cases.⁵

In light of these findings, it is important to consider the ability of the justice system to detect and remedy problems with scientific evidence. We will argue that the system, at present, does a poor job of distinguishing strong from weak forensic science. As an illustration we will examine a capital case in Virginia in which DNA evidence was presented to the jury in a highly misleading manner. Although this problem affected the fundamental fairness of the trial, it was never addressed during direct appeals nor was it addressed during collateral state and federal habeas proceedings. We will explore this particular failure of the justice system in detail and seek to draw broader lessons about the ability of the system to detect and remedy problems in forensic science, and how that ability might be improved.

Section I of the article will provide an overview of the case of *Commonwealth of Virginia v. Robin Lovitt*,⁶ focusing on the nature of the state’s DNA evidence, the misleading manner in which that evidence was presented to the jury, reasons this problem occurred and why it was not caught at trial. Section II will discuss the extensive review of the case that occurred during direct appeal and during collateral state and federal habeas proceedings. This discussion will reveal that the problems with the DNA evidence, that we consider fundamental to the case, were never addressed. We will comment on possible reasons for this failure. Section III will discuss Lovitt’s successful

⁴ Saks & Koehler, *supra* note 2.

⁵ *Id.*, at 892.

⁶ 260 Va. 497, 537 S.E.2d 866 (2000)(*cert. denied*, 534 U.S. 815)

petition for clemency, which was granted on grounds unrelated to the problems with the presentation of DNA evidence at trial. Section IV will discuss unsuccessful efforts to have the Lovitt case reviewed by Virginia's new Forensic Science Board and Scientific Advisory Committee, which are state boards created for the purpose of overseeing and improving the work of the state forensic laboratory. Finally, Section V will draw lessons from the case-study analysis and make recommendations for improving the way in which the justice system handles scientific evidence.

I. Commonwealth of Virginia v. Robin Lovitt

A. Facts of the Case as Presented at Trial⁷

In the early morning hours of November 18, 1998, two men entered Champions Billiards Hall (the pool hall) in Arlington, Virginia and saw the night manager, Clayton Dicks, fighting with another man behind the bar. The other man appeared to be an African-American. When they saw the other man stab Dicks several times with a silver-colored weapon, they immediately left the pool hall and called the police. When police arrived, Dicks was lying on the floor, fatally wounded. The pool hall cash register was broken and a cash drawer was missing. A police canine unit found a pair of bloodstained scissors in the woods about 15 yards behind the pool hall. The two eyewitnesses recalled seeing a white Cadillac in the parking lot when they arrived at the pool hall that night, but the car was gone when they returned with the police. The police issued a bulletin asking officers to be on the lookout for an older white Cadillac.

⁷ This summary is drawn from the Virginia Supreme Court's account of the facts on Lovitt's direct appeal, *Lovitt v. Commonwealth*, 260 Va. 497, 502-08, as well as Reporter's transcripts of the expert testimony and closing arguments.

Robin Lovitt, a former employee of the pool hall, was arrested for the crime several days later, after turning himself in to police. Lovitt admitted to having stolen the cash drawer, but claimed he had no involvement in the murder. According to his account, he was in the pool hall restroom and emerged to see Dicks fighting with another man. Wanting nothing to do with the fight, he ducked back into the restroom out of the way. When he re-emerged, the man was gone and Dicks appeared to be dead. Needing money, Lovitt decided to take a locked cash drawer from the register. He carried the cash drawer through the woods behind the pool hall to the home of his cousin, who helped him open it. Lovitt's cousin, Warren Grant, who lived about a quarter mile from the pool hall, testified at trial that Lovitt had brought the cash drawer to his home in the early morning hours of November 18th and that the two had broken open the cash drawer and split the money. Lovitt claimed that he left the pool hall on foot. He did not own a Cadillac.

During the preliminary hearing neither of the two eyewitnesses could identify Lovitt as the man they had seen stabbing Dicks, but at trial one of the two testified he was 80% certain Lovitt was that man. An inmate who had been housed with Lovitt in the Arlington jail testified at the trial that Lovitt had confessed to killing Dicks in order to steal the money to buy drugs.

Forensic examination found no fingerprints matching Lovitt on the bloodstained scissors. The shirt and pants Lovitt was wearing when arrested matched the description provided by several witnesses of what Lovitt was wearing the night of the killing. Examination of the shirt and pants found no bloodstains. However, when he was arrested Lovitt was also wearing a jacket. A forensic analyst testified that there was a bloodstain

on the front of this jacket although DNA tests on that stain had produced inconclusive results.

DNA tests were also conducted on two bloodstains on the scissors. The state's DNA analyst testified that a stain near the pointed tip of one blade contained a DNA profile consistent with the victim, Clayton Dicks. A second stain higher on the blade contained a mixture of DNA from more than one person. The DNA profile⁸ of the primary donor again matched Clayton Dicks. However, the stain contained an additional genetic allele (allele 17 at locus vWA) that could not have come from Dicks but could have come from Lovitt.⁹ Because only a single allele was found, rather than a complete profile, the DNA analyst testified that she could not say conclusively whether Lovitt's profile was or was not consistent with that of the second contributor to the DNA mixture. Nevertheless, Lovitt possessed the additional allele and therefore could not be eliminated as a possible contributor. A DNA expert called by the defendant testified that approximately 19% of African-Americans have the allele in question, and 81% do not have that allele.

In closing arguments the prosecutor noted that Warren Grant (Lovitt's cousin) and a woman who lived with Grant had both testified that Lovitt was sweating when he arrived at their house with the cash drawer. The prosecutor suggested Lovitt's sweat was the source of the extra allele on the scissors:

...we know that it is a mixture and we know that mixtures frequently are made by fluids. So there is the blood from the victim, and there there is some other body fluid. It could well be sweat, for instance.

But what you know is that when the defendant arrived at Warren Grant's house, both Warren Grant and Delores Harris noticed he was sweating, and that

⁸ [Background material to be added on DNA profiling]

⁹ [Definition of "allele" to be added]

was just minutes before he would have discarded those scissors, which was just minutes before he had stabbed Clayton Dicks with them.

Now, nobody could say yes, this is definitely the defendant's DNA. But you will remember—and this is why it is important—that the goal of DNA analysis is to exclude people from being the contributors of the DNA...and what you know is that the defendant has an allele number 17.

Robin Lovitt cannot be excluded as the person who left the sweat on those scissors.¹⁰

The prosecutor went on to argue that the blood on Lovitt's jacket came from the victim and that Lovitt was aware of that fact and tried to cover it up by claiming he had not been wearing the jacket the night of the crime.

Blood on the jacket, that's another circumstance for you to consider. [The eyewitnesses] both told you the murderer had on a jacket. They said it was a blue jacket, a dark jacket. And you can see [defendant's] jacket in the Polaroid.

You know the defendant had on this jacket on the 24th of November. You know it's his jacket. And he had told Detective Hanula that he had been wearing all of those clothes except for the shoes for the past few days.

Now, he told Officer Ferrone, I wasn't wearing that jacket at the time it occurred, and that gets to be another matter of significance.

The defendant was concerned obviously about blood on his clothing. He told [the jailhouse informant] that he was concerned about blood on his clothing, that he changed some of his clothing, and he mentioned particularly a T-shirt. And he said that there was blood on the stomach area.

I'm not going to pick up the jacket again, but if you want to look at it, you will notice that there were cut out pieces of where the DNA was on the jacket, and that is where the blood spots were. And it is right there on the stomach area.

But of course it's a dark jacket. He probably didn't notice it in the beginning...

Now I realize [the DNA expert] can't tell you much about the blood and she told you why, because somehow the dye or whatever was masking it. But you do know that it fact there was blood on it.¹¹

In sum, the prosecution presented what appeared to be a credible and convincing case. The key difficulty for the prosecution obviously was proving that Lovitt actually committed the murder rather than merely stealing the cash box after the crime, as he claimed. Had the prosecution relied solely on the 80%-certain eyewitness and the

¹⁰ Reporter's Transcript, p. 1530-31.

¹¹ *Id.* at p. 1531-33.

jailhouse informant, the case would have been weak, as problems with the reliability of eyewitnesses and “jailhouse snitches” are well known.¹² In that case, the loose end concerning the Cadillac might well have troubled the jury.

What bolstered the case and made it credible was the scientific evidence that appeared to link Lovitt directly to the stabbing through a classic double-transfer. DNA consistent with Lovitt was found on the murder weapon while (apparently) blood from the victim was found on Lovitt’s jacket, a fact Lovitt tried to cover up. The DNA tests were hardly definitive, of course, but they appeared to provide convincing circumstantial evidence. Based on the testimony, jurors could reasonably infer that there was better than an 80% chance that an innocent person chosen at random would be eliminated as the source of the extra allele on the scissors, and Lovitt was not eliminated. The DNA tests on the jacket were “inconclusive,” but the location of the blood fit neatly with the prosecution’s theory that Lovitt was the murderer. It was on the front of the jacket—right where one would expect there to be blood splatter from the stabbing victim (and right where the informant had claimed Lovitt found blood on a t-shirt that he discarded). The DNA tests, as they were reported to the jury, made a weak and problematic case appear solid and credible.

On September 20, 1999, after two hours of deliberation, the jury found Lovitt guilty of capital murder of Clayton Dicks during the commission of a robbery. The trial then entered a penalty phase which culminated in a sentence of death.

¹² See generally, Barry Scheck, Peter Neufeld & Jim Dwyer, *ACTUAL INNOCENCE* (2000).

B. A Closer Look at the DNA Evidence

The DNA testing in the case was conducted by Carol Palmer of the Virginia Division of Forensic Science (DFS) Northern Laboratory in Fairfax Virginia.¹³ Palmer used a testing kit known as Promega PowerPlex that examines short tandem repeats (STR's) at eight genetic locations (loci) on the human genome.¹⁴ At each locus there are several possible markers (called "alleles") that a person might have. To identify those alleles, the DNA from the eight loci is amplified (replicated) and then separated by length on a gel.¹⁵ The alleles produce fluorescent "bands" that are detected by a computer-operated scanning device. The position of the bands on the gel indicates which of the various alleles have been detected. The darkness or intensity of a "band," which the computer measures in units of optical density ("OD"), indicates roughly how much DNA is present from the individual who was the source of the band. Each individual has two alleles at each locus—one allele is inherited from each parent. Numbers are used to designate the alleles.

The bands detected by the computer are displayed on a printout called a STaRCall spreadsheet.¹⁶ However, the analyst may sometimes decide to ignore or override the computer's determinations when deciding whether to report bands. Based on visual examination of a "band" the analyst may decide, for example, that the "band" is spurious or unreliable, and therefore decide not to report it or to call the results "inconclusive." Under the DFS protocol, the decision to call a band "inconclusive" rests entirely upon the

¹³ Palmer has a Masters Degree in Forensic Science from Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁴ For general background on STR testing, *see* John M. Butler, FORENSIC DNA TYPING: BIOLOGY, TECHNOLOGY & GENETICS OF STR MARKERS, 2d Ed. (2005).

¹⁵ At that time, analysts in the Virginia DFS used the Hitachi/FM-Bio system, which uses gel electrophoresis, to separate the amplified DNA by length and detect the resulting "bands." For a complete description of this system, *see* Butler, *supra* note 12, at 361-67.

¹⁶ STaRCall is a trademark of the company that produced the software used by DFS for band detection.

subjective judgment of the analyst.¹⁷ There is no objective standard. In the Lovitt case, analyst Palmer declared a number of bands that were detected by the computer to be “inconclusive.” Her decision to disregard bands detected by the computer, which was never reported to the jury, is part of what makes the DNA evidence in the case problematic.

Table 1: Alleles Detected in DNA Testing—Commonwealth v. Lovitt (Numbers in parentheses show the optical densities of the underlying bands as shown in the StaRCall Spreadsheet)

Sample	Genetic Locus							
	CSF1PO	TPOX	THO1	vWA	D16S539	D7S820	D13S317	D5S818
Clayton Dicks	8, 13	8, 9	7, 7	11, 14	12, 13	8, 11	10, 14	8, 12
Robin Lovitt	10, 12	8, 11	7, 9.3	16, 17	9, 12	8, 12	11, 12	10, 12
Scissors Stain B	8 (271), 13 (121)	8 (296), 9 (272)	7 (2314)	11(2553) 14(2508) 17 (131)	12 (75) 13 (61)	8 (146) 11 (129)	10 (140) 14 (101)	8 (456) 12 (483)
Jacket— Cert. of Analysis	-INC-	***	-INC-	-INC-	-INC-	-INC-	-INC-	-INC-
Jacket— StaRCall Spread- sheet	10 (102) 12 (62)	***	***	16 (15), 17 (85)	***	8 (3), 12 (32)	11 (51), 12 (5)	10 (25), 11 (24), 12 (26)

Note: *** indicates no bands were detected; INC indicates that the analyst deemed the results “inconclusive.”

Table 1 shows the DNA profiles (sets of alleles) of the key samples in the Lovitt case. There is no controversy about the DNA profiles of victim Clayton Dicks or defendant Lovitt, which are shown in the first two rows of the table. The third row of the table shows the alleles (bands) that were detected on the mixed stain on the scissors. The numbers in parentheses are the optical density (OD) values for each band as shown on the

¹⁷ Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Criminal Justice Services, Division of Forensic Science, *Fluorescent Detection PCR-Based STR DNA Protocol: Powerplex 1.1, 2.1 and 16 Bio Systems, Forensic Biology Section Procedure Manual*, Section 3 (copy on file with authors).

STaRCall spreadsheet.¹⁸ Analyst Palmer reported all of the bands that the computer detected in the scissors stain. The bands that she elected not to report were all found in the stain on Lovitt’s jacket. The fourth row of the table shows what Palmer reported regarding the jacket stain in the laboratory’s Certificate of Analysis (formal report) on the case. At each locus she reported either that no results were obtained (designated by “***”) or that the results obtained were “inconclusive” (designated “-INC-”). However, examination of the STaRCall spreadsheet shows that the computer detected a total of eleven bands in this sample at five different loci. The last row (row 5) shows the alleles that the computer detected (with their corresponding optical densities).

During the trial, analyst Palmer testified that the DNA test results on the jacket were inconclusive and the defense lawyers never challenged this characterization. The prosecutor then argued that the blood on the jacket was from the victim, Clayton Dicks. But the STaRCall results, shown in the last row of Table 1, tell a different story. The computer detected bands at five of the eight loci examined by the test. This five-locus DNA profile does *not* match Clayton Dicks—it matches Robin Lovitt. At all five loci the alleles (bands) that the computer detected are exactly those that would be expected if Lovitt rather than Dicks was the source of the bloodstain. At one locus (D5S818) there is

¹⁸ The authors received a copy of the spreadsheets (along with other information DFS had produced in discovery) in 2005 from journalist Margaret Edds of the *Virginian Pilot*. Edds was seeking the first author’s opinion on the DNA testing in the Lovitt case. DFS had provided a copy of the STaRCall Spreadsheets to Lovitt’s lawyer shortly before the trial. Letter from Deanne F. Dabbs, Program Manager, Forensic Biology Section, DFS, to Denman A. Rucker, Esq., counsel for Robin Lovitt, dated Sept. 8, 1999, with attachments (copy on file with authors).

an additional allele (allele 11) that cannot be accounted for by Lovitt, but it could not have come from Dicks either.¹⁹

These results provide strong evidence that the bloodstain on Lovitt's jacket came from Lovitt himself, not from the victim. The probability that a randomly chosen person would happen to have a five-locus DNA profile that corresponds with the bands that the computer detected on the jacket is approximately 1 in 10,000 among Caucasians and 1 in 20,000 among African-Americans.²⁰

The optical density (OD) values of these bands were relatively low compared with the bands detected on the scissors, which indicates that these bands were relatively faint. The faintness of the bands may be the reason that Carol Palmer decided to characterize them as inconclusive. Extremely faint bands can sometimes be spurious—the product of random “noise” in the system—and therefore may be unreliable data. However, if these jacket results are “random noise” how did they happen to match up so nicely with the profile of Robin Lovitt, the owner of the jacket? Monkeys playing with typewriters do not produce sonnets, and random noise in a DNA test does not produce a five-locus, one-in-10,000 DNA match.

As noted earlier, the DFS laboratory protocol leaves the decision to call a band “inconclusive” entirely to the analyst. It is a subjective judgment. There is no objective standard. Moreover, analysts are not “blind” to the consequences of their judgment.

Carol Palmer was undoubtedly aware of how her determination would affect the

¹⁹ Because each person can contribute at most two alleles at a given locus, finding three alleles at a locus is generally taken as evidence of a mixture of DNA from more than one person. On the other hand, given the low OD value it might be a spurious result.

²⁰ The authors computed these frequencies using the standard cumulative probability of inclusion method based on frequency data from Bruce Budowle, et al., *Population Data on the Thirteen CODIS Core Short Tandem Repeat Loci in African Americans, U.S. Caucasians, Hispanics, Bahamians, Jamaicans, and Trinidadians*. 44 J.FORENSIC SCI. 1277 (1999).

prosecution's case. Under these circumstances there is a real possibility that she was influenced, perhaps entirely unconsciously, to shape her conclusions in a direction helpful to the state.²¹ Palmer could not have been relying solely on the optical density of the bands, as measured objectively by the computer. Three of the jacket bands (CSF1PO alleles 10 and 12, and vWA allele 17) have higher OD values than the weakest band on the scissors (allele 13 at locus D16S539). Yet all of the jacket bands were deemed "inconclusive" and all of the scissors bands were reported.²²

In sum, the DNA test results on the jacket have strong probative value for showing that the bloodstain came from Lovitt rather than Dicks. The failure to report these findings deprived the jury of an important piece of evidence that would have undermined a key point in the prosecution's case.

Next, let's consider the DNA test results on the scissors. While the jury heard nothing about the ten alleles that link Lovitt to the stain on the jacket, they heard a great deal about the single allele (allele 17 at locus vWA) that reportedly linked him to the scissors. The presence of three alleles at locus vWA indicates that the stain on the scissors contains a mixture of DNA from more than one person. Every allele in the profile except for the 17 allele at locus vWA corresponds with the profile of the victim, Clayton Dicks. So the stain on the scissors appears to be a mixture of DNA from Dicks and another person who has vWA allele 17.

²¹ See, D.M. Risinger, M. Saks, W. Thompson & R. Rosenthal, *The Daubert/Kumho Implications of Observer Effects in Forensic Science: Hidden Problems of Expectation and Suggestion*. 90 CAL.L.REV 1 (2002).

²² In the absence of objective standards for interpretation, the failure of the lab to use blind procedures leaves the analyst open to the charge that her judgments was influence by observer effects, also known as examiner bias, *see* Risinger, et al., *supra* note 19. In other words, the failure to use procedures that are either objective or blind, promotes suspicion that the analyst either consciously or unconsciously shaped her conclusions to fit the government's theory of the case. It is reasonable to wonder, for example, whether the analyst would have chosen to report the weak results on the jacket had they matched Clayton Dicks rather than Robin Lovitt.

During the trial, much was made of the fact that Lovitt has vWA allele 17. Palmer initially stated that she could “make no conclusion” as to whether Lovitt was included or excluded as a possible contributor to the DNA on the scissors.²³ When pressed by the prosecutor, however, she testified that she *could* have eliminated Lovitt had he not possessed the 17 allele. This led to the following exchange:

Q: So you were not able to eliminate him in doing this process totally?

A: I was not able to draw a conclusion, therefore, not able to eliminate him either.²⁴

An expert called by the defendant also conceded that because Lovitt possesses the “extra” 17 allele he could not be eliminated as a possible contributor to the scissors stain. The defense expert testified that only 19% of African-Americans possess this particular allele and hence that 81% of that population could be eliminated as possible contributors.

There are several problems with the evidence that was used to link Lovitt to the scissors. First, the defense expert provided an incorrect statistic about the percentage of the population who possess the 17 allele at locus vWA. Based on population data published by the FBI, it can be determined that about 33% of African-Americans, 46% of Caucasians and 40% of Hispanics possess that allele.²⁵ In other words, the defense expert significantly understated the frequency of this allele, making the fact that Lovitt happened to have the allele appear more significant than it actually was.²⁶

²³ RT p. 1178, Lines 18-21.

²⁴ RT p. 1183, Lines 3-6.

²⁵ Bruce Budowle, et al., *Population Data on the Thirteen CODIS Core Short Tandem Repeat Loci in African Americans, U.S. Caucasians, Hispanics, Bahamians, Jamaicans, and Trinidadians*. 44 J.FORENSIC SCI. 1277 (1999).

²⁶ The defense expert appears to have made an elementary error in Genetics. The figure that he reported appears to have come directly from a table of data on the “allele frequency” of the vWA 17 allele. However, the “allele frequency” represents the percentage of all vWA alleles that are 17. As any student of genetics should know, the “allele frequency” is not the same as the percentage of people in a population

A second problem with the theory that Lovitt's DNA was on the scissors is that Lovitt possesses *eleven* alleles that were *not* found on the scissors. The experts who testified assumed that Lovitt might have contributed too little DNA for these other alleles to be detected. It is generally understood that when the quantity of DNA from a contributor is extremely limited, DNA tests sometimes fail to detect a complete profile.²⁷ Most commonly the test fails to detect *any* alleles from a contributor at a particular locus, a phenomenon known as locus dropout. This phenomenon probably explains the failure of the test to detect Lovitt's alleles on the jacket at locus TPOX, THO1 and D16S539. This phenomenon could possibly explain the failure to detect any of Lovitt's alleles on the scissors at any locus other than vWA, although there is no particular reason to expect vWA (rather than some other locus) to be the last or only locus at which a contributor's alleles are detected.

A further problem with the theory that Lovitt's DNA is on the scissors is that only one of Lovitt's two alleles at locus vWA was detected. Generally, if a contributor has two alleles at a locus, a DNA test will either detect both of them or neither of them. Finding one of two alleles, a phenomenon known as "allelic dropout" or "within locus dropout" is less common, although it sometimes happens.²⁸ When allelic dropout occurs, a random process controls which of the two alleles is lost.²⁹

who possess the allele. Because each person inherits two alleles, one from each parent, the percentage of a population that will possess a particular allele is $1-(1-f)^2$, where f represents the allele frequency.

²⁷ See Butler, *supra* note x, at 167-70.

²⁸ As a point of comparison, notice that there is no evidence of allelic dropout on the jacket stain, only locus dropout.

²⁹ As Butler, *supra* note x, at 68, explains, "When amplifying very low levels of DNA template, a phenomenon known as *stochastic fluctuation* can occur. Stochastic effects, which are an unequal sampling of the two alleles present from a heterozygous individual, result when only a few DNA molecules are used to initiate PCR."

In summary, while it is conceivable that Lovitt's DNA could account for the "extra allele" at locus vWA, this theory requires the occurrence of a series of unlikely underlying events: there must have been allelic dropout at locus vWA; the allelic dropout must have caused the loss of Lovitt's 16 allele rather than the 17 allele; and Lovitt's alleles must also have dropped out at every locus except vWA. So the theory that the secondary contributor is Lovitt is rather implausible. The alternative theory—that the secondary contributor is someone else—may actually be more plausible given that the 17 allele at locus vWA is found in over one third of the human population. The alternative theory does not require that there have been allelic drop-out at locus vWA because the secondary contributor could have genotype 11,17 or 14,17 or 17,17.³⁰

C. An Even Closer Look at the DNA Evidence: Analyzing the Probative Value of the Scissors Match With Likelihood Ratios³¹

Scholars sometimes gauge the probative value of evidence for distinguishing two hypotheses by computing a likelihood ratio (LR).³² In this section we will present a formal analysis of the value of the DNA evidence that was used to link Lovitt to the

³⁰ If the secondary contributor had one of these genotypes, only a single "extra allele" (allele 17) would be apparent beyond the two alleles of the primary contributor. The primary contributor's alleles (11 and 14) would mask (cover) the other allele of a secondary contributor with genotype 11,17 or 14,17. If the secondary contributor had genotype 17,17 (a homozygote) only a single 17 allele would appear. Approximately 5.8% of African-Americans, 12% of Caucasians and 7.5% of Hispanics have one of these three genotypes. The frequency of people with one of the three genotypes in the general population, taking no account of race, is about 11%.

³¹ [Note to editors: This section could be moved into a technical appendix to improve the flow of the paper]

³² The likelihood ratio is the ratio of two conditional probabilities: the probability of the evidence given that one hypothesis is true and the probability of the evidence given that the other hypothesis is true. There is a long tradition in evidence scholarship of using the likelihood ratio to describe the probative value of evidence. See D.H. Kaye & Jonathan J. Koehler, *The Misquantification of Probative Value*, 27 LAW & HUM. BEHAV. 645, 649 (2003); Richard O. Lempert, *Modeling Relevance* 75 MICH. L. REV. 1021, 1025 (1977); Tillers & Schum, *supra* note 14, at 833; BERNARD ROBERTSON & G.A. VIGNAUX, INTERPRETING EVIDENCE: EVALUATING FORENSIC SCIENCE IN THE COURTROOM 17 (1995); COLIN G.G. AITKEN, STATISTICS AND THE EVALUATION OF EVIDENCE FOR FORENSIC SCIENTISTS 42 (1995). One need not know which of two hypotheses is true to compute a likelihood ratio. One need only be able to estimate how much more probable the evidence would be under one of the hypotheses than the other.

scissors, using likelihood ratios. Based on this analysis we will argue that the DNA evidence had little or no value for proving Lovitt's DNA was on the scissors and may in fact have proved the opposite. Readers who are already convinced on this point, and readers who have no interest in mathematical characterizations of evidence, are welcome to skip this section.

Let's consider the likelihood ratio for distinguishing two hypotheses: $H1$ —that Lovitt is the secondary contributor to the DNA on the scissors, and $H2$ —that someone else (a random person) is the secondary contributor. The evidence we will consider, E , is that a 17 allele was detected at locus vWA that could not have come from the primary contributor. Under this formulation, the value of E for proving distinguishing $H1$ and $H2$ depends on the likelihood ratio $p(E|H1)/p(E|H2)$. To the extent this likelihood ratio exceeds 1.00, the evidence, E , supports $H1$; to the extent the LR is less than 1.00, the evidence, E , supports $H2$.

The term $p(E|H1)$ designates the probability of observing a 17 allele at vWA if Lovitt is the secondary contributor. Although this probability is not zero, it cannot be very high because Lovitt has genotype 16,17 and no 16 was detected. As already noted, the loss of one of two alleles from a contributor (allelic dropout) is a relatively uncommon event. For purpose of discussion, let's assume the probability of this event is 0.30 or 30%.³³ We must also take into account that it was the 16 rather than the 17 allele

³³ Of course any estimate of $p(E|H1)$ is somewhat speculative. We base our estimate of 0.30 on the general observation that loss of one of two alleles from a contributor is relatively uncommon. If a contributor has two alleles, the test will typically either detect both of them or neither of them. As an illustration, consider the DNA profile shown in Table 1 for the sample from Lovitt's jacket (based on the StaRCall worksheet). At five loci, the test detected *both* of Lovitt's alleles. At three loci the test detected *neither* of Lovitt's alleles. However, there is no locus at which the test detected just one of Lovitt's two alleles. If the frequency of single-allele drop-out were 30% or higher, it seems likely that we would see an example of it in the jacket sample where the lab was clearly working at the very threshold of its ability to detect limited quantities of DNA. As discussed below, we think the value of $p(E|H1)$ may actually be

that was lost. Because allelic dropout is caused by a stochastic (random) process,³⁴ let's assume the conditional probability of this event, given that allelic dropout occurs, is 50% or 0.50. Accordingly, we will assume $p(E|H1) = 0.30 \times 0.50 = 0.15$.

To compute the denominator of the LR , which is $p(E|H2)$, we must consider the probability of getting a 17 allele if the secondary contributor was a random person other than Robin Lovitt. This probability also depends in part on whether allelic dropout occurred. If allelic dropout did *not* occur, then the secondary contributor must have one of three possible genotypes: 11,17 or 14,17 or 17,17. As noted earlier, about 11 percent of the population has one of these genotypes, so $p(E|H2)$ is about 0.11 if allelic dropout did *not* occur.

Because we assumed allelic dropout might have occurred when we computed $p(E|H1)$, we must also consider that possibility when computing $p(E|H2)$. If one of two alleles from the secondary contributor “dropped out,” then only one of the secondary contributor's alleles would be detected. The probability that this detected allele would be a 17 is equal to the “allele frequency,” which is approximately 24% in the general population.³⁵ So $p(E|H2)$ is about 0.24 if allelic dropout *did* occur.

Now that we have estimates of $p(E|H2)$ under the two possible assumptions about whether allelic dropout occurred, we can combine those estimates by taking a weighted average—weighting each estimate according to the probability that allelic drop-out occurred. We will assume, as before, that there is a probability of 0.70 that dropout did

much lower than 0.30, but we adopt that value as a conservative estimate for purpose of illustration. The implications of alternative estimates are considered below.

³⁴ Butler, *supra* note 26.

³⁵ According to FBI population studies, the “allele frequency” of the 17 allele at locus vWA is approximately 18% among African-Americans, 26% among Caucasians, and 22% among Hispanics. See Budowle et al., *supra* note 23.

not occur, and a probability of 0.30 that it *did* occur. Hence, $p(E|H2) = (0.70 \times 0.11) + (0.30 \times 0.24) = 0.149$, or 14.9%.

Based on these calculations, the value of the likelihood ratio, $p(E|H1)/p(E|H2)$ is $0.15/0.149 = 1.0067$, which rounds off to 1.0. This likelihood ratio indicates the evidence, E , has virtually no probative value for distinguishing the two hypotheses. Because E is as likely under $H1$ as under $H2$, the occurrence of E tells us nothing about whether $H1$ or $H2$ occurred.

The only contestable assumption we made in computing the likelihood ratio was the 30% probability of allelic dropout.³⁶ However, close examination of our likelihood ratio (LR) model shows that LR is not very sensitive to the accuracy of this assumption. Under our model, the LR will increase with increases in the probability of allelic dropout. However, even if we make the unrealistic assumption that allelic dropout was inevitable (i.e., the probability of allelic dropout is 1.0), the resulting likelihood ratio increases only to approximately 2.1.³⁷ This LR suggests the value of the evidence, E , under the most favorable possible assumptions (which unrealistically maximize its value), is comparable to the value of a “match” between Lovitt and the bloodstain on a genetic characteristic found in approximately half of the human population.³⁸

³⁶ We think the actual probability is unlikely to be higher than 30% and may well be much lower. If the drop-out probability is indeed lower than 30%, as we suspect, it means that the evidence, E , supports $H2$ —in other words, the DNA evidence supports the theory that someone other than Lovitt was the secondary donor.

³⁷ Under that assumption, $p(E|H1) = 0.5$ and $p(E|H2) = 0.24$, hence $LR = 0.5/0.24 = 2.08$.

³⁸ The jury was undoubtedly left with the impression that the value of the DNA evidence for incriminating Lovitt was much greater. The defendant’s own expert testified (incorrectly) that 81% of the population could be eliminated as a possible source of the vWA 17 allele, and that Lovitt could not.

If, on the other hand, we assume (more realistically) that the probability of allelic dropout is only 10%, then the *LR* drops to 0.41.³⁹ In other words, under this assumption, the evidence, *E*, is more than twice as likely if *someone other than Lovitt* was the secondary contributor than if Lovitt was the secondary contributor, which means the evidence is exculpatory: it supports the theory that Lovitt was *not* the secondary contributor.

D. Did Robin Lovitt Receive a Fair Trial?

When they retired to the deliberation room to decide Robin Lovitt's fate, the jurors undoubtedly had mistaken impressions about two key facts in the case. They surely thought it likely that DNA from Lovitt was on the scissors and that the victim's blood was on Lovitt's jacket. In fact, as we have shown, the evidence provides little or no support for the theory that Lovitt's DNA was on the scissors—it may actually show the opposite. Furthermore, there is strong evidence (that the jury never heard) that the blood on Lovitt's jacket came from Lovitt himself, and not from the murder victim. Given the weakness of the other evidence in the case, it is by no means clear that the jury would have convicted Lovitt, had they known the truth about the DNA evidence.

Did Lovitt receive a fair trial? We think most people viewing this trial through the lens of everyday morality would conclude that he did not. Indeed, we think our analysis raises serious concerns about whether the jury reached the correct verdict. Consequently, we think that an effective system of post-trial review should have recognized the problems with the DNA evidence and provided a remedy. At a minimum,

³⁹ Under the assumption of a 10% chance of allelic drop-out, $p(E|H1) = 0.1 \times 0.5 = 0.05$ and $p(E|H2) = (.90 \times .11) + (0.10 \times 0.24) = 0.123$, hence $LR = 0.05/0.123 = 0.406$.

the issue should have been identified and its implications should have been carefully considered and discussed. As we will show in the next section, however, that did not happen. Although Lovitt was represented by able counsel and received the full panoply of post-conviction consideration afforded those who are sentenced to death, the courts that participated in this process of review never directly recognized or acknowledged the problems that we have identified.

II. Direct Appeal and Habeas Corpus Proceedings

A. Direct Appeal

The Virginia Supreme Court heard Lovitt's direct appeal of the capital murder conviction and death sentence in 2000.⁴⁰ In the appeal Lovitt raised a plethora of issues⁴¹ but made no claim of any unfairness in the presentation of DNA evidence.⁴² The Supreme Court found no reversible error in any judgments of the trial court and therefore affirmed the conviction and death sentence.

Lovitt next petitioned the United States Supreme Court for a Writ of Certiorari. At this stage, Kirkland and Ellis, one of the nation's premier law firms, which had taken the case *pro bono*, was representing Lovitt. The petition focused on the trial judge's decision to admit evidence of Lovitt's prior criminal behavior during the sentencing

⁴⁰ Lovitt v. Commonwealth of Virginia, 260 Va. 497, 537 S.E.2d 866 (2000). Lovitt was represented at this stage by his trial counsel and another Virginia lawyer.

⁴¹ Lovitt raised a number of procedural challenges to Virginia's capital trial procedures that the court dismissed in a pro forma manner by citing to previous cases in which the same challenges had been denied. The court gave more attention to a few issues, such as Lovitt's claims that the trial judge had erred in failing to strike a prospective juror for bias, in allowing police officers to vouch for the "good reputation for truthfulness" of the jailhouse informant, but ultimately found no merit to any of these arguments.

⁴² Lovitt raised only one issue on direct appeal that related in any way to DNA analyst Carol Palmer. When cross-examining Palmer, Lovitt's trial lawyer asked whether she would have expected to find blood from the victim on Lovitt's clothing, if Lovitt had stabbed the victim. After Palmer responded that she would not necessarily have expected to find blood, Lovitt's lawyer sought permission of the court to impeach her by taking the stand himself and testifying that she had given a different answer when he had asked her the same question before trial. The trial judge refused to allow the lawyer to testify.

phase of the trial, including alleged criminal acts for which he had not been convicted (unadjudicated criminal conduct). The petition raised no claim of any unfairness related to the presentation of DNA evidence. The United State Supreme Court denied the petition.⁴³

B. State Habeas Proceedings

After the denial of Lovitt's direct appeal, the law firm of Kirkland and Ellis continued to represent him. His counsel included prominent lawyers, most notably former United States Solicitor General and Watergate Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr, a senior partner at the firm. Robert E. Lee, an experienced appellate lawyer with the Virginia Capital Representation Resource Center, also assisted on the case. Lovitt's legal team devoted considerable energy and resources to investigating the case and, in November 2001, filed a state petition for a writ of habeas corpus.⁴⁴

The petition alleged three general violations of Lovitt's due process rights: the state had destroyed the remaining biological evidence from the case, preventing any further DNA testing; the prosecution had suppressed exculpatory evidence; and Lovitt had received inadequate assistance of counsel at trial. The Virginia Supreme Court entered an order directing that the Circuit Court of Arlington County conduct an evidentiary hearing on these issues.

At the two-day evidentiary hearing in June 2002, over twenty witnesses testified. During this hearing, Lovitt's lawyers called two witnesses to testify about the DNA evidence. Based on his review of the laboratory report, laboratory notes, gel images and

⁴³ 534 U.S. 815 (2001).

⁴⁴ Robin McKennel Lovitt v. Warden, Sussex 1 State Prison, 266 Va. 216, 585 S.E.2d 801 (2003)[hereafter Lovitt v. Warden].

STaRCall Worksheets, Dr. George Riley, an expert in forensic DNA testing, expressed opinions about the evidence that are largely consistent with the views expressed in this article. He expressed the opinion that additional testing of the stains on the scissors “could and almost certainly would have demonstrated that the genetic material on the scissors could not have come from Mr. Lovitt...”⁴⁵ Based on the data in the STaRCall worksheet, Riley concluded that the DNA on the jacket “almost certainly came from Mr. Lovitt himself.”⁴⁶ When asked about the prosecutor’s suggestion, in the closing argument, that there was blood from the victim on Lovitt’s jacket, Riley said “that’s completely inconsistent with the DNA results seen.”⁴⁷ With regard to the statistical frequency of the vWA 17 allele, Riley testified that it is found in 48% of Caucasians, 29% of Blacks and 43% of Hispanics.⁴⁸

The second DNA witness was Peter Neufeld, co-founder and co-director of the Innocence Project at the Cardozo Law School in New York City. Neufeld was called primarily as an expert in post-conviction DNA testing to testify that the biological evidence that the state had destroyed was relevant and material to Lovitt’s case. However, Neufeld also testified that the DNA results from the scissors had been presented at trial in a manner “that is grossly misleading to the jury.”⁴⁹ He expressed the opinion that it was unethical for the prosecutor to suggest during closing arguments that the bloodstain on Lovitt’s jacket came from the victim when the prosecutor had “raw data

⁴⁵ RT Vol I, p. 34, June 18, 2002. Dr. Riley was clearly skeptical of the allelic dropout theory and thought the absence of Lovitt’s 16 allele was strong evidence that Lovitt could *not* have been the secondary contributor. His views on this point appear to be more favorable to Lovitt than the views of the authors of this article.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at p. 34-35.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at p. 54, lines 14-15.

⁴⁸ Unlike the defense witness who testified at trial, Dr. Riley computed these frequencies correctly. The numbers he presented differ slightly from the numbers presented in this article because he relied on a Commonwealth of Virginia database rather than the FBI database used by the authors.

⁴⁹ RT. Vol I, p. 85.

in [his] hands which tells you that the bloodstain matches Mr. Lovitt.”⁵⁰ Thus, the record created during the post-conviction evidentiary hearing established the basic facts from which one could reasonably conclude that the jury was misled about the value of the DNA evidence and hence that Lovitt did not get a fair trial.

Although this evidence was in the record, it was not directly acknowledged or discussed in any subsequent court opinion. Following the evidentiary hearing, the circuit judge submitted to the state Supreme Court a written report stating findings of fact and recommended conclusions of law. On September 12, 2003, the Supreme Court of Virginia accepted the circuit judge’s recommendations and dismissed Lovitt’s habeas petition. The Supreme Court’s lengthy opinion said very little about the DNA evidence and did not directly address any of the issues we have raised here about the way it was presented. Instead, the opinion focused on the three major legal challenges that Lovitt’s counsel had raised in their briefs.⁵¹

1. Destruction of Evidence

It was undisputed that the Chief Deputy Clerk of the Circuit Court of Arlington County (hereafter “Clerk”) had drafted an order authorizing the destruction of all the exhibits received in evidence in the Lovitt trial, including the scissors and Lovitt’s jacket. A circuit judge signed the order and the evidence was destroyed in late May of 2001.⁵²

⁵⁰ *Id.*, at p. 123.

⁵¹ *See*, Petitioner’s Opening Brief in *Lovitt v. William True*, Warden Sussex State Prison [hereafter “Opening Brief”],

⁵² The Chief Deputy Clerk testified that he was unaware of the statute and thought he was authorized to destroy trial exhibits after the conviction was affirmed. At the time the evidence was destroyed, however, Lovitt’s direct appeal had not been affirmed. His petition for writ of certiorari to the U.S. Supreme Court was still pending. The Clerk testified that he sought to destroy the evidence in order to create additional space in the clerk’s office evidence room. Two deputy court clerks testified that they had advised the Clerk, who was their immediate superior, that he should not destroy the evidence in Lovitt’s case because it was a capital case and Lovitt had not been executed. The destruction of evidence violated a longstanding state policy that no evidence is destroyed in a capital case before the defendant is put to death. The

This destruction of evidence violated a Virginia statute that took effect on May 2, 2001 that specifically requires in capital cases that the state “store, preserve and retain” any “human biological evidence” until the sentence is executed.⁵³

Lovitt’s lawyers argued that the state’s intentional destruction of the biological evidence violated Lovitt’s right of due process by depriving him of the opportunity for a meaningful habeas review.⁵⁴ Interestingly, Lovitt’s lawyers did not argue that the biological evidence was exculpatory, only that it was *potentially* exculpatory because further testing might have helped Lovitt to prove his claim of actual innocence.⁵⁵ They also argued that destruction of the evidence undermined Lovitt’s ability to prove his claim that “his trial counsel was ineffective for failing to order additional DNA testing.”⁵⁶

The Virginia Supreme Court found these arguments unconvincing, saying that Lovitt had “failed to present authority to support his claim that habeas corpus relief is the proper remedy for inability to obtain further testing.”⁵⁷ The major authority Lovitt presented was *Arizona v. Youngblood*,⁵⁸ which established the principle that a state’s bad faith destruction of potentially exculpatory evidence violates due process. The Virginia Supreme Court questioned whether the principle established in *Youngblood* applies to post-conviction (rather than pre-trial) destruction of evidence and found the case inapplicable anyway because “the record lacks any evidence that an agent of the

Attorney General of Virginia acknowledged that the Lovitt case was the only capital case in modern times in which the state of Virginia had destroyed evidence before the defendant’s execution.

⁵³ Virginia Code Section 19.2-270.4:1.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 11-21.

⁵⁵ This is an important distinction because, as explained below, it is a clear violation of due process for a state to destroy “exculpatory” evidence, regardless of whether the state’s agents act in good or bad faith. With respect to *potentially* exculpatory evidence, the defendant must show the state’s agents acted in “bad faith” to establish a due process violation. *Arizona v. Youngblood*, 488 U.S. 51 (1988). Potentially exculpatory evidence includes evidence “of which no more can be said than that it could have been subjected to tests, the results of which might have exonerated the defendant.” 488 U.S. at 51-57.

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 13.

⁵⁷ *Lovitt v. Warden*, 266 Va. at 239.

⁵⁸ 488 U.S. 51 (1989). *See also*, *California v. Trombetta*, 467 U.S. 479 (1984).

Commonwealth acted in bad faith...”⁵⁹ As the Court conceived the issue, “the presence or absence of bad faith by the state depends on whether agents of the state had knowledge of the exculpatory value of the evidence when it was lost or destroyed.” Although Lovitt had presented evidence that the Chief Clerk acted illegally and in violation of longstanding policy, and that the Clerk knew he was ordering the destruction of biological evidence from a capital case, according to the Court Lovitt had not established that “an agent of the Commonwealth had knowledge of the exculpatory value of the trial exhibits at the time they were destroyed.” The Court went on to say that even if the Clerk had known that the exhibits contained biological evidence that could have been subject to additional testing, “such awareness would not have met the constitutional standard of materiality under *Youngblood* because Lovitt can assert no more than the mere possibility that further testing could have exculpated him.”⁶⁰

2. *Suppression of Exculpatory Evidence*

Lovitt’s second line of attack on his conviction concerned alleged *Brady* violations⁶¹—i.e., the failure of prosecutors to disclose exculpatory evidence. None of the alleged violations concerned DNA evidence. However, these claims are worth a quick review here because they highlight the weakness of the state’s case against Lovitt. During the evidentiary hearing, Lovitt’s lawyers presented evidence that prosecutors had failed to disclose three pieces of evidence: (1) that the medical examiner had concluded

⁵⁹ 266 Va. at 242.

⁶⁰ *Id.* In fact, Lovitt had asserted considerably more than the *mere possibility* that further testing would be exculpatory. Lovitt’s opening brief states: “...because the evidence was destroyed, Mr. Lovitt has been clearly prejudiced in his attempts to prove that his trial counsel was ineffective for failing to order additional DNA testing. DNA expert Dr. George Riley has testified that such testing would likely prove conclusively that blood on Mr. Lovitt’s jacket was Mr. Lovitt’s, not the victim’s, as the Commonwealth argued at trial.” Opening Brief, at 13. The Virginia Supreme Court did not mention or acknowledge Dr. Riley’s testimony.

⁶¹ See, *Brady v. Maryland*, 373 U.S. 83 (1963); *Stickler v. Greene*, 527 U.S. 263 (1999); *Kyles v. Whitley* 514 U.S. 419 (1995).

that the fatal wounds to the victim could not have been caused by scissors as small as those that were introduced at trial as the murder weapon;⁶² (2) that the jailhouse informant who testified against Lovitt had been a police informant in four previous cases;⁶³ and (3) that the jailhouse informant had made statements to prosecutors before trial that were inconsistent with his trial testimony.⁶⁴ The Court ultimately concluded that the withheld evidence, with one exception, was not actually exculpatory (within the meaning of *Brady*). The exception was evidence that the jailhouse informant had received a benefit for acting as an informant in one previous case. However, the Court concluded that the failure to disclose that one item of exculpatory evidence was not material because the jurors' ignorance of that evidence "did not place Lovitt's trial in a posture that would undermine confidence in the verdict."⁶⁵

Once again, our main point in recounting these arguments is to note that they miss what we see as the major flaw in the trial. The Court never considered whether the misleading and inaccurate presentation of the DNA evidence might have "placed Lovitt's trial in a posture that would undermine confidence in the verdict."

⁶² The police had asked the medical examiner to compare two pairs of scissors found in the pool hall with the victim's wounds. The medical examiner concluded that some of the victim's wounds were too deep to be accounted for by either pair of scissors. Lovitt's lawyers contended that the prosecutors were aware of this conclusion and were also aware that one of the pairs of scissors shown to the medical examiner was identical in size to the bloody scissors that were presented to the jury as the murder weapon, but had failed to disclose this information to the defense.

⁶³ The state acknowledged this fact, but argued that there was only one previous case in which the prosecutors actually *knew* the informant had cooperated and the informant had received a benefit or inducement from the state for doing so. The state argued successfully that prosecutors were not obligated to disclose information about prior cooperation that they did not know about and that, in the absence of an inducement, the fact that the informant had previously assisted the police was not exculpatory evidence.

⁶⁴ Lovitt's lawyers produced a sworn affidavit from the informant to support this claim, but the state called the informant to testify in the evidentiary hearing, at which time he recanted and disavowed his statements in the affidavit.

⁶⁵ 266 Va. at 247.

3. *Ineffective Assistance of Counsel*

Finally, Lovitt’s lawyers sought to establish that trial counsel had provided ineffective assistance.⁶⁶ In the Petition for Habeas Corpus, Lovitt’s lawyers alleged that trial counsel had been ineffective during both the guilt and penalty phases of the trial. They alleged that trial counsel had been deficient on a number of dimensions, including failure to adequately investigate and expose weaknesses in the DNA evidence and failure to pursue additional testing of the bloody scissors and Lovitt’s jacket.

During the hearing, one of Lovitt’s trial lawyers, Denman Rucker, testified that he had made a strategic decision not to question the “inconclusive” DNA test results on the scissors and jacket. In his view, this strategy had the advantage of allowing defense counsel to question the adequacy of the state’s proof that Lovitt was the perpetrator while avoiding the possibility that further testing of the scissors or jacket might yield results that would further implicate Lovitt in the murder.⁶⁷

After the evidentiary hearing, Lovitt’s habeas counsel seemed to lose interest in the claim that trial counsel’s handling of the DNA evidence was deficient—although they did not formally abandon this claim, they no longer actively argued for it. Instead, they focused their attention entirely on the alleged failure of trial counsel to perform adequately during the penalty phase of the trial.⁶⁸ The Virginia Supreme Court addressed counsel’s handling of the DNA evidence in a single paragraph that simply recounted

⁶⁶ To prevail on a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel, the petitioner must satisfy the two-part test of *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668 (1984), which requires a showing that (1) the counsel’s performance was deficient relative to reasonable professional standards and (2) that the deficient performance prejudiced the defense.

⁶⁷ This testimony is described *Lovitt v. Warden*, 266 Va. at 251.

⁶⁸ The Opening Brief that they filed with the Virginia Supreme Court included a major section on ineffective assistance of counsel that focused entirely on penalty-phase issues and said nothing at all about counsel’s handling of the DNA evidence.

Rucker's claim that his approach was the product of a purposeful strategy and found that this strategy was objectively reasonable.⁶⁹

The Court analyzed Lovitt's other allegations concerning inadequate assistance of counsel at much greater length but ultimately found no merit in any of them. Having thus disposed of all three of Lovitt's challenges to his conviction, the Court dismissed the petition for habeas corpus.

C. Federal Habeas Proceedings

On March 8, 2004, Lovitt's lawyers filed a petition for habeas corpus in the Federal District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, seeking what is known as collateral review of the case.⁷⁰ Under standards established by the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 ("AEDPA"), a federal court can grant relief on habeas claims that a state supreme court has dismissed on the merits only if the federal court finds that the state court's decision was "contrary to, or involved an unreasonable application of, clearly established Federal law, as determined by the Supreme Court of the United States."⁷¹

Lovitt's lawyers claimed that the Virginia Supreme Court had applied federal law unreasonably on four major issues. We will review these claims and the court's resolution of them briefly. We note at the outset, however, that as with the state habeas petition, none of these claims addressed the misleading presentation of DNA evidence in Lovitt's trial.

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ They were essentially asking the federal court to determine that the Virginia Supreme Court's resolution of the habeas petition had violated Lovitt's rights under the United States Constitution.

⁷¹ 28 U.S. C. § 2254(d)

Lovitt's lawyers first argued that the Virginia Supreme Court had misapplied *Brady v. Maryland* when it analyzed the prosecution's failure to disclose the medical examiner's opinion about the murder weapon⁷² and the jailhouse informant's history of cooperation with police. The federal district court reviewed the record on these issues and declined to find the Virginia Supreme Court had acted unreasonably.⁷³ The federal district court went on to find that the suppressed evidence, even if viewed collectively, was not sufficiently material to have affected the verdict, declaring that: "in this court's opinion, the Commonwealth's evidence was strong enough that neither the medical examiner's initial scissors opinion nor [the informant's] prior history of law enforcement cooperation would substantially have affected its weight or value," and hence that "suppression of such evidence still would not undermine confidence in the jury's verdict."⁷⁴

Second, Lovitt's lawyers argued that the prosecutors had engaged in misconduct by arguing to the jury that the bloody scissors were the murder weapon when they knew

⁷² The Virginia Supreme Court found that prosecutors had failed to disclose the medical examiner's opinion that the victim's fatal wounds could not have been caused by either of two pairs of scissors from the pool hall. However, the Court concluded this evidence was not exculpatory "because that opinion related to scissors that were not introduced into evidence, were not the alleged murder weapon, and were not shown to be the same size as the murder weapon." 266 Va. at 245. Lovitt's lawyers argued that this conclusion was unreasonable because the record of the evidentiary had shown that one of the two pairs of scissors was in fact identical in size to the scissors that were the alleged medical weapon and that these scissors had been given to the medical examiner for the very purpose of determining whether the identical bloody scissors found behind that pool hall could have been the murder weapon. However Lovitt was not able to persuade the federal district court that the scissors were identical. Because the bloody scissors that were presented at trial as the murder weapon had been destroyed, Lovitt had to rely on a photograph of those scissors, taken next to a ruler, for purposes of size estimation. Although the medical examiner was shown this photograph during the evidentiary hearing, and had testified that the scissors in the photograph were the same size as one of the two pairs of scissors she had compared to the victim's wounds, and were too small to have caused all of those wounds, the federal district court noted that the medical examiner could measure only one of the two blades of these scissors. "The other blade she could not measure due to its positioning in the photograph." 330 F.Supp.2d at n.6. Thus Lovitt's constitutional challenge faltered due to his inability to prove that the two blades of the destroyed scissors were the same length.

⁷³ 330 F.Supp at 613-618.

⁷⁴ 330 F.Supp. 2d at 625.

the medical examiner had concluded it could not have been. They cited *Miller v. Pate*,⁷⁵ a case in which the United States Supreme Court vacated the sentence of a state prisoner because the prosecution had described a pair of stained underwear as the “bloody shorts” and had repeatedly stated that the shorts were “stained with blood” even though the prosecutor knew the shorts were stained with paint, not blood. However, the federal district court held the situation in Lovitt was distinguishable because Lovitt’s prosecutors had good reason to believe the bloody scissors were the murder weapon, notwithstanding the contrary opinion of the medical examiner.

Lovitt’s third argument was that the Virginia Supreme Court had unreasonably applied *Arizona v. Youngblood* and related cases when it excused the state’s destruction of the remaining biological evidence. Lovitt’s lawyers argued strenuously that the Clerk’s illegal destruction of the biological evidence went beyond mere negligence and constituted “bad faith” within the meaning of the *Youngblood* standard. They also emphasized the “materiality” of the destroyed evidence, again citing Dr. Riley’s statement that additional testing “would likely prove conclusively” that the blood of the jacket was from Lovitt rather than the victim.⁷⁶ But the federal district court found that the Virginia Supreme Court had reasonably construed the *Youngblood* standard when it found no evidence of “bad faith.” The court made dismissive comments about the value of the destroyed evidence, saying:

Petitioners’ current, unsubstantiated assertion—that further testing would likely prove conclusively, that some of the blood stains identified on certain items of evidence actually originated from him and not from the victim—adds gloss to his argument but little texture to the analysis. Such an argument is analogous to that rejected in *Illinois v. Fisher*, wherein the contested evidence provided the

⁷⁵ 386 U.S. 1 (1967)

⁷⁶ Petition Under 28 U.S.C. 2258 for Writ of Habeas Corpus, filed in *Lovitt v. True*, 330 F. Supp.2d 603 (2004) at 35-36.

defendant's "only hope for exoneration." To meet the Youngblood standard, more particularity is required.⁷⁷

As discussed earlier, examination of the state's DNA test results on the jacket revealed a 1-in-10,000 DNA match with Robin Lovitt. One can only wonder whether the federal judge would have found that evidence sufficiently "particular" (or sufficiently textured) had he been told about it.

Lovitt's fourth and final argument was that the Virginia Supreme Court had unreasonably applied *Strickland v. Washington* when it rejected Lovitt's claim that his trial counsel had been ineffective. Once again, the brief filed by Lovitt's lawyers focused exclusively on the alleged ineffectiveness of trial counsel during the penalty phase of the capital trial. They offered no arguments about trial counsel's investigation or presentation of DNA evidence. The federal district court found that the Supreme Court of Virginia had acted reasonably in denying Lovitt's claims of ineffective assistance.

Having found no merit in any of Lovitt's claims, the federal district court dismissed the petition for habeas corpus.

Lovitt next appealed the dismissal of his petition to the United States Circuit Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, which issued an opinion affirming the District Court's ruling on April 6, 2005.⁷⁸ Lovitt's lawyers argued that the district court had "erred by mistaking deference for a rubber stamp" and in so doing had "overlooked the Virginia Supreme Court's unreasonable determinations of law and fact" on the four issues Lovitt had raised. The Fourth Circuit responded by reiterating the conclusions of the federal district court and expressing agreement with them.

⁷⁷ 330 F.Supp.2d at 634 (citation to *Illinois v. Fisher*, 540 U.S. 544 (2004) omitted).

⁷⁸ *Lovitt v. True*, 403 F.3d 171 (2005).

The Circuit Court's opinion adopts a rather weary tone, suggesting that the case has been reviewed so thoroughly already that no important issues could be left:

[Lovitt's] challenges to his conviction and sentence ... have been heard by many courts. The Supreme Court of Virginia rendered two thorough and conscientious opinions in his case—one on direct appeal and one on habeas. The state habeas court in Arlington also treated Lovitt's claims with care, holding a two-day evidentiary hearing and authoring detailed findings of fact and conclusions of law. Finally, the federal district court again reviewed Lovitt's claims, and dismissed them in a meticulous and lengthy opinion.

This case is a good example of the care with which state courts should treat capital cases. We think the Virginia Supreme Court properly resolved Lovitt's claims. Even if that were not the case, however, we could not begin to say that it unreasonably applied clearly established Supreme Court law.⁷⁹

From our perspective, having seen that there were major problems with the presentation of DNA evidence at trial that were never addressed by any of these reviewing courts, these statements ring hollow. Indeed, this passage seems ironic. If this case is a good example of the care with the state of Virginia tries capital defendants, one can only wonder how many other capital defendants received unfair trials.

After obtaining a favorable ruling from the Fourth Circuit, the state wasted little time scheduling Lovitt for execution. The execution date was set for July 11, 2005. However, on June 28, 2005 Lovitt's lawyers filed a Petition for Writ of Certiorari with the United States Supreme Court. This Petition raised only three issues: trial counsel's allegedly inadequate investigation of penalty phase issue, the state's destruction of the trial exhibits, and the prosecution's failure to disclose the medical examiner's opinion about the scissors. In each instance, Lovitt argued that the Fourth Circuit had applied the law incorrectly. Lovitt's lawyers also asked for a stay of execution to allow the petition to be heard. The U.S. Supreme Court issued the stay less than five hours before the

⁷⁹ 403 F.3d. at 175.

execution was scheduled.⁸⁰ However, the Supreme Court later declined to hear the case, summarily denying Lovitt's petition on October 3, 2005. The state thereupon rescheduled Lovitt's execution for November 30, 2005.

III The Clemency Petition and Expert Review Panel

Having exhausted all judicial remedies, Lovitt's final option was a petition for clemency to the governor of Virginia. On July 7, 2005, Lovitt's lawyers filed a petition asking governor Mark Warner to commute Lovitt's sentence to life in prison. The clemency petition largely focused on the same issues raised in the state and federal habeas petitions, but it included some new elements.

The destruction of biological samples was given special emphasis because the quality of DNA testing by the Virginia Department of Forensic Science (DFS) had recently been called into question after serious errors came to light in another capital case, that of Earl Washington, Jr.⁸¹ In April 2005, a professional organization known as the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors—Laboratory Accreditation Board (ASCLD-LAB) had issued a scathing report finding serious errors in the DFS work in the Washington case and calling for a broader review to determine whether these DNA testing problems were endemic.⁸² Governor Warner thereafter appointed a panel of experts to conduct a broader review of DFS DNA testing, including a review of all DNA

⁸⁰ Lovitt v. True, 126 S.Ct 10 (2005).

⁸¹ An independent DNA laboratory in California had contradicted the findings of the DFS after retesting samples from the Washington case. Although the director of the DFS laboratory denied there was any problem with the DFS work, a panel of experts assembled by The Virginian Pilot newspaper to look into the matter had sided with the independent lab, and had declared the DFS results to be faulty, *see, Experts blister state's DNA results*. THE VIRGINIAN PILOT, June 20, 2004. Thereafter, the governor of Virginia asked a professional association called the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors-Laboratory Accreditation Board (ASCLD-LAB) to conduct a detailed review.

⁸² ASCLD/LAB LIMITED SCOPE INTERIM INSPECTION OF THE DFS CENTRAL LABORATORY, April 9, 2005 (copy on file with authors).

testing that had been performed in capital cases (including the Lovitt case).⁸³ On July 8, 2005, three days before Lovitt's scheduled execution, one of the members of the expert panel, Arthur J. Eisenberg, wrote a letter to the governor that stated:

Please be advised that all members of the scientific review team have now completed our review of the [DFS] file, data and laboratory notes involved in the [Lovitt] case. We conclude that the case contains no technical procedural errors or deviations from accepted protocol that may have substantially affected the integrity of the results in that case. Similarly, in our view, the case contains no interpretive conclusions that are not scientifically supported.⁸⁴

At the time Eisenberg wrote this letter, however, neither he nor any other member of the expert panel had reviewed transcripts of the expert testimony in the Lovitt case. They were basing their conclusion solely on the DFS laboratory reports,⁸⁵ which had stated that the results of the DNA testing were "inconclusive." As already discussed, the problem with the DNA evidence in this case does not lie in the laboratory report but in the way the test results were presented in court. The laboratory report does not say that Lovitt's DNA was found on the murder weapon. It quite properly expressed no conclusion on this point. Yet the jury heard testimony and argument that the DNA results did show DNA consistent with Lovitt's on the murder weapon. The expert panel was also unaware of the double standard applied by the government in telling the jury about "inconclusive" results that supported Lovitt's guilt while failing to present the more convincing "inconclusive" results that supported his innocence. Reasonable people can differ about what standards are appropriate for distinguishing "conclusive" from

⁸³ Frank Green, *Study will assess whether errors in Washington case are 'endemic to the system.'* RICHMOND TIMES-DESPATCH, June 14, 2005. The expert panel was supervised by appellate court judge Robert Humphreys, acting as a special master. Humphreys said the review of the Lovitt case was "urgent" because Lovitt's execution was, at that time, scheduled for July 11, 2005. *Id.*

⁸⁴ Quoted in Frank Green, *Lovitt evidence still an issue: Killer faces execution, but expert cites way to analyze data in case.* RICHMOND TIMES DISPATCH, July 9 2005.

⁸⁵ Authors' Personal communication (by e-mail) with Arthur Eisenberg. Copy of correspondence on file with the authors.

“inconclusive” DNA test results, but no reasonable person can believe that different standards should apply depending on whether the results support or contradict the government’s position in a criminal prosecution. Because the expert panel viewed the test results in isolation, without considering how those results were presented and used in the trial, they failed to see the whole picture and their report is of little value in assessing the fairness of Lovitt’s trial. Nevertheless, the expert report was apparently taken as the final word on this issue by the governor’s office.

An issue raised for the first time during the clemency proceedings was whether the “inconclusive” results reported by the state DFS might be clarified through examination of DFS computer files. As noted earlier, a computer-operated scanning device detected the “bands” produced by the DNA tests in the Lovitt case. The scanned images of the bands, and the computer files showing the optical density (“OD”) of the bands, had been maintained by the laboratory, and thus presumably were available for further analysis. Lovitt’s lawyers submitted a declaration (prepared by one of the authors of this article) that explained that new analytic techniques are now available that might allow a more definitive assessment of which “bands” constitute reliable data.⁸⁶ Lovitt’s lawyers had asked the state to provide copies of the electronic files, but the state had refused.⁸⁷ When asked about the state’s unwillingness to disclose these potentially

⁸⁶ Declaration of William C. Thompson, J.D., Ph.D. June 30, 2005 (copy on file with the authors). The new analytic techniques provide an objective basis for distinguishing signal from noise in computerized genetic data. See, Krane, et al. *Run-specific limitations of quantitation and detection*. J.FORENSIC.SCI. (in press). This declaration also discussed the other problems with the DNA evidence used against Lovitt that have been presented in this article.

⁸⁷ Frank Green, *Lovitt evidence still an issue: Killer faces execution, but expert cites way to analyze data in case*. RICHMOND TIMES DISPATCH, July 9 2005. This article quoted Thompson saying "I can't say for sure that that analysis would clarify matters, but there is certainly a good chance that it might...[i]t just seems to me as a citizen that is something you would want to know before proceeding with an execution."

enlightening computer files, a spokesperson for the governor cited the findings of the expert panel and said their review of the case was sufficient.⁸⁸

The stay of execution issued by the U.S. Supreme Court on July 11, 2005 gave his advocates additional time to rally public support for clemency. Groups including the Innocence Project, American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia, the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, Amnesty international and other civil liberty and religious leaders petitioned to Warner for clemency in Lovitt's case.

Additionally, one of the nation's most prominent forensic DNA scientists, Dr. Mitchell Holland of Pennsylvania State University,⁸⁹ sent a letter to governor offering an extensive critique of the DNA evidence that had been used to convict Lovitt.⁹⁰ Holland's critique was entirely consistent with the analysis of the DNA evidence offered in this article. He argued that it is "quite possible that the jury was misled" by the testimony and argument that linked Lovitt to the bloody scissors, he identified the error in the defense expert's statistical computations, and he criticized the DFS for failing to report the low level alleles on the jacket, saying "it is important that any information available to the laboratory be used to benefit the defendant." He argued that the conclusions of Arthur Eisenberg and the expert panel were irrelevant because the expert panel had not examined the manner in which the DNA evidence was presented in court. Finally, Holland asked for an opportunity to review the "original electronic data" collected by DFS in the case, agreeing that review of the computer files might help clarify whether the

⁸⁸ *Id.*

⁸⁹ Holland was scientific director of the Armed Forces DNA Laboratory in Rockville, Maryland before becoming Laboratory Director at Bode Technology Group, a major independent laboratory. In June 2005 he moved to Penn State as Associate Director of the Forensic Science Program.

⁹⁰ Letter from Mitchell Holland to Hon. Mark Warner, Governor of Virginia, Nov. 18, 2005 (copy on file with authors).

test results on the jacket should really have been deemed “inconclusive.” He offered to travel to the DFS laboratory at his own expense in order to do so.

On November 29, 2005, one day before Lovitt’s scheduled execution, Governor Warner commuted his death sentence to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. According to the governor’s press release he granted clemency because the Clerk’s improper destruction of evidence had prevented post-conviction re-testing of the biological evidence.⁹¹ He considered the destruction of the physical evidence as an “extraordinary circumstance that requires executive intervention to reaffirm public confidence in our justice system.” According to the governor, “in this case, the actions of an agent of the Commonwealth, in a manner contrary to the express direction of the law, comes at the expense of a defendant facing society’s most severe and final sanction. The Commonwealth must ensure that every time this ultimate sanction is carried out, it is done fairly.”

One would hope, of course, that every time a *life sentence* is carried out it is also "done fairly." If Lovitt's conviction was unfair, the appropriate remedy is a new trial, not a reduction in sentence. An unfair legal process that leads to a life sentence might be somewhat less offensive than one that leads to an execution, but it is still offensive.

The governor's press release, which was his only public statement on the matter, did not specifically address the claim that Lovitt received an unfair trial on the issue of guilt or innocence due to biased and misleading testimony about "inconclusive" DNA tests. However, the governor stated that he “found no fault with the judgment of the jury, or with prosecutors and defense counsel.” By implication, then, the governor

⁹¹ Official Press Release, Office of the Governor of Virginia, Nov. 28, 2005 (copy on file with authors).

considered Lovitt's trial fair enough (at least for a life sentence) notwithstanding the loss of the biological evidence.

IV. Virginia's Forensic Science Board and Scientific Advisory Committee

In response to the scandal over the mistyping of DNA evidence in the Earl Washington case, the Virginia Assembly passed legislation in 2005 creating a Forensic Science Board and a Scientific Advisory Committee to oversee operations of the state's Department of Forensic Science.⁹² The Scientific Advisory Committee is composed of experts in relevant scientific disciplines.⁹³ Among its duties are to "review and make recommendations to the Director of the Department and the Forensic Science Board concerning: ... guidelines for the presentation of results in court." The statute also provides that "[u]pon request of the Director of the Department, the Forensic Science Board, or the Governor, the Committee shall review analytical work, reports, and conclusions of scientists employed by the Department."

Virginia is one of several states that have created oversight bodies to monitor the operation of state forensic laboratories.⁹⁴ This administrative oversight function potentially creates an independent mechanism for examining problems with the use of scientific evidence, such as those that occurred in the Lovitt case. As with judicial oversight, however, the ability of such bodies to deal with these problems may be less than ideal. As it turned out, the Lovitt case provided an early test of the ability of the Virginia Forensic Science Board to deal forthrightly with problems in scientific evidence in the state.

⁹² Virginia Code Section 9.1-1113. *See, Challenges greet panel overseeing state lab.* THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT, Nov 28, 2005.

⁹³ *Id.*

⁹⁴ *See Tarnish, supra note 3, at 14.*

In January 2006, the Virginia Forensic Science Board received a request to have the Scientific Advisory Committee examine the DNA evidence in the Lovitt case and the way that evidence was presented to the jury.⁹⁵ However, the Board refused to have the Committee examine the case. In a letter explaining this decision, the Chair of the Board, S. Randolph Sengel,⁹⁶ contended that the manner in which scientific evidence is presented in court is not within the purview of the Scientific Advisory Committee:

The manner in which counsel can present and argue from evidence at trial is not within the statutory scope of Committee review, which includes the ‘analytical work, reports, and conclusions of scientists employed by the Department.’ Accordingly, I cannot find that the review authority of the Scientific Advisory Committee extends to encompass a review of the manner in which prosecutors and defense attorneys attempt to present evidence at trial, or to [the] assessment of the objectivity or propriety of arguments made from such evidence by trial counsel. For these reasons I find that your request for the review of the case *Commonwealth v. Robin Lovitt* does not fall within the scope of the review authority of the Committee.⁹⁷

The Board’s refusal to consider the Lovitt case seems wrongheaded for several reasons. First, as should be obvious to readers of this article, the problems with DNA evidence in the Lovitt case went well beyond the manner in which counsel presented and argued from the evidence in court. It raises a number of important issues about the interpretation and reporting of DNA test results, such as the appropriate standards for declaring a finding “inconclusive,” whether (as Professor Holland argued) the laboratory has an obligation to disclose “inconclusive” results that are helpful to a defendant, and

⁹⁵ The request came in a letter from Richmond lawyer Betty Layne DesPortes and William C. Thompson (one of the authors of this article) to Joseph Bono, Chair of the Virginia Scientific Advisory Committee, Jan. 27, 2006 (copy on file with authors). The letter described the problems with the DNA evidence that have been discussed in this article and asked that the Scientific Advisory Committee examine the case.

⁹⁶ S. Randolph Sengel, who Chairs the Forensic Science Board is also the elected Commonwealth Attorney for the City of Alexandria, Virginia. Robin Lovitt was tried in the adjacent jurisdiction of Arlington County.

⁹⁷ Letter from S. Randolph Sengel to Betty Layne DesPortes and William C. Thompson, Feb 14, 2006 (copy on file with the authors).

whether, having declared a result “inconclusive” the analyst should nevertheless testify in court in a manner that links the defendant to the evidence. Surely these matters fall within the statutory authority of the Scientific Advisory Committee.

Mr. Sengel sidestepped the Board’s responsibility to review these important matters by construing the question presented as a purely legal one:

While it is certainly true that ineffective assistance of counsel or improper use of evidence by the government may deprive a defendant of a fair trial, determination of such a question requires legal, not scientific, analysis of all the evidence in the case by a court of competent jurisdiction. Such matters are within the province of appellate courts.⁹⁸

Clearly, this narrow construction of the issues presented is wrong. Moreover, like the Fourth Circuit’s world-weary suggestion that all possible issues in the Lovitt case had been exhausted (and further review was pointless and tiresome), this argument rings hollow in light of our knowledge of the underlying problems in the case and the failure of the judicial system to deal with them. It is ironic that the Forensic Science Board would declare the issues in the Lovitt case appropriate matters for the appellate courts when, as we have seen, the appellate courts failed utterly to address or even consider those issues.

By passing the buck in this manner, the Forensic Science Board effectively ended Lovitt’s last hope of having an official body review the evidence in his case. This refusal to look at the evidence is all the more disappointing in light of the fact that electronic files may still exist that have never been reviewed using modern techniques and could still prove enlightening on the key issues. The decision of the Board shut the door on further examination of the evidence in the case. That door is likely to stay closed.

⁹⁸ *Id.*

V. Lessons from *Lovitt*

The jury that convicted Robin Lovitt of capital murder was misinformed about key facts of the case. It was a conviction obtained under false scientific pretenses. Whether Lovitt is actually guilty or not can be debated, but it seems quite clear that his trial was unfair. Close examination of this case suggests that we have a system of trial in which scientific findings can be misrepresented. Perhaps equally important it show us that our system of appellate and habeas review can fail to recognize these problems. Although the problems with the Lovitt case have been readily apparent to several outside observers who happened to review the evidence and testimony, the judicial system has turned a blind eye to the matter, as has the state board assigned to oversee forensic science in Virginia. The governor of Virginia commuted the death sentence to life imprisonment, but according to his official statement the commutation had nothing to do with the fairness of the trial. Despite the reduction in sentence, the case should properly be viewed as an embarrassing failure of our system of justice.

The problems began in the laboratory, where the lack of objective standards for distinguishing conclusive from inconclusive DNA test results allowed a state laboratory analyst to report that the results of DNA testing on Lovitt's jacket were "inconclusive" even though the results actually undermined the prosecution's case by showing that the blood on Lovitt's jacket came from Lovitt himself, and not (as the prosecutor had claimed) from the murder victim. It continued at trial where a prosecutor pressed the laboratory analyst to testify in a manner that improperly linked Lovitt to the blood on the murder weapon and argued (incorrectly) that the victim's blood was found on Lovitt's jacket. The defense lawyers were also deficient. They apparently failed to investigate

the case sufficiently to realize that the DNA evidence from the jacket was actually exculpatory, and they failed to make an effective challenge to the weak DNA evidence that was used to link their client to the murder weapon. Part of their problem appears to have been an incompetent defense expert, who botched his genetic frequency calculations and presented statistical estimates to the jury that significantly overstated the value of the evidence linking Lovitt to the murder weapon.

During the appellate process these problems went unrecognized. Lovitt's direct appeal was handled by one of his trial lawyers, with the assistance of another lawyer. It is unclear whether these lawyers even recognized the problems that are the focus of this article. Even if they had recognized these problems, it is doubtful that they could have raised them on direct appeal. The focus of the direct appeal is on procedural error and it seems difficult if not impossible to link the problems that occurred in Lovitt's trial to specific procedural faults, such as incorrect evidentiary rulings by the trial judge.

The failure of counsel to raise these problems during the state and federal habeas proceedings requires a more extensive explanation. The testimony of Dr. Riley during the state habeas hearing provided all the basic facts that we have relied upon to show the unfairness of Lovitt's trial. Although this information was available in the record that they created, appellate counsel may not have fully appreciated its significance. In particular, they appear not to have appreciated that the "inconclusive" results on the jacket actually constituted exculpatory data in their own right.⁹⁹ Although Dr. Riley

⁹⁹ At a recent conference at UCLA, Professor Kenneth Starr, who was lead counsel for Lovitt during the habeas proceedings appeared on a panel with the authors of this article. After hearing the authors' analysis of the DNA evidence in the Lovitt case, Professor Starr candidly acknowledged that Lovitt's lawyers, although aware of the deficiencies in the DNA evidence noted by Dr. Riley, may not have fully appreciated their significance. To the extent that is true, we believe it reflects the inherent difficulty of the subject matter and not any lack of diligence or professionalism by habeas counsel who, as already noted, were

expressed the opinion that the DNA profile on the jacket was consistent with Lovitt, he did not calculate the rarity of the matching profile. Hence, counsel apparently did not know that there was a highly specific, 1-in-10,000 match with Lovitt.

Even if they had appreciated that point, it is unclear whether it would have made a difference. The major problem Lovitt faced was a poor fit between the specific problems with the scientific evidence in his trial and the standard doctrinal framework that courts employ for habeas review. In order to establish ineffective assistance of counsel, for example, Lovitt's habeas counsel needed to establish that his trial lawyers performed below reasonable professional standards.¹⁰⁰ But Lovitt's trial lawyers obtained an independent expert and at least made an effort to challenge the evidence that allegedly connected Lovitt to the murder weapon. Those steps alone probably met or even exceeded the constitutional standard of effectiveness.¹⁰¹ Nor is it clear that defense counsels' performance fell below reasonable professional standards by virtue of their failure to look beyond the "inconclusive" findings reported on the jacket and to realize the results were actually exculpatory. It is plausible that most defense lawyers would have accepted the conclusions of that report without further inquiry.

Similar problems of fit arise when considering whether there was prosecutorial misconduct with regard to the DNA evidence. There is no reason to believe that the prosecutors suppressed any DNA test results. Although we can now recognize that their arguments to the jury were misleading, there is no reason to believe that the prosecutors

superb lawyers. If they had difficulty fully understanding the scientific evidence, then any lawyer would have.

¹⁰⁰ See note 63 *infra* and accompanying text

¹⁰¹ Under the constitutional standard, defense counsel cannot be faulted for failure to recognize the statistical error of their own expert because few if any defense lawyers would have had that ability. Although the jury heard incorrect and misleading testimony, that problem cannot be traced to the failure of defense counsel to meet reasonable professional standards.

were knowingly or intentionally misrepresenting facts. Hence it is difficult to make a case that these arguments violated Lovitt's constitutional rights.

In sum, it is difficult to trace the problems with the presentation of DNA evidence in the Lovitt case to any particular error or misconduct by prosecutor, defense counsel or judge that would constitute a violation of Lovitt's constitutional rights. Although we believe most reasonable people applying standards of everyday morality would consider his trial unfair due to the misleading presentation of key scientific evidence, it was not the kind of unfairness that is easily recognized as a constitutional violation in the context of post-conviction habeas review. Recognizing that fact, Lovitt's habeas counsel may have simply concluded that arguments about the presentation of DNA evidence were not as promising as the other arguments that they chose to present instead.

Viewed in this light, the failure of the judicial system to recognize or remedy the problems with the DNA evidence in the Lovitt case reflect broader problems with the legal standards under which courts conduct habeas review. As a number of scholars have pointed out, our system's focus on procedural error and misconduct can allow questionable verdicts to stand in cases where there are defects in the evidence that cannot be traced to these factors.

In recognition of this problem, Professor D. Michael Risinger has recently proposed that claims of factual innocence, such as Lovitt's claim, should be reviewed under reformed standards, similar to those applied in British courts of appeal, that call for overturning convictions that, for any reason, are deemed "unsafe."¹⁰² In our view, the Lovitt case is an example of an "unsafe verdict." The failure of our current system to

¹⁰² D.Michael Risinger, *Unsafe Verdicts: The Need for Reformed Standards for the Trial and Review of Factual Innocence Claims*. 42 U.HOUSTON.L.REV. 1281 (2004).

recognize and remedy that problem, but granting a new trial, is a case-in-point illustration of the wisdom and desirability of Professor Risinger's proposal.

VI. Conclusion

There is a longstanding public perception that innocent people have little to fear in the American justice system. The system offers a variety of procedural protections that are designed to work to the advantage of the accused, making convictions difficult to obtain in any but the strongest cases. This perception is reflected in a famous observation of Judge Learned Hand:

Under our criminal procedure, the accused has every advantage... He is immune from question or comment on his silence; he cannot be convicted when there is the least fair doubt in the minds of any one of the twelve... Our dangers do not lie in too little tenderness to the accused. Our procedure has been always haunted by the ghost of the innocent man convicted. It is an unreal dream.¹⁰³

If false convictions are an "unreal dream" in criminal cases in general, they should be even less likely in capital cases. Because "death is different" capital defendants are afforded procedural protections at every stage that go beyond those offered to other defendants.¹⁰⁴ During their trials, capital defendants typically are represented by more experienced and better-funded lawyers than other defendants and have greater access to the services of investigators and experts. After conviction, capital cases are typically reviewed more thoroughly and at higher appellate levels than other criminal cases. Once direct appeals are exhausted, capital defendants can pursue collateral review through state and federal habeas actions. The lawyers who represent them in these habeas actions often have extensive resources which are used to

¹⁰³ United States v. Garsson, 291 F. 646, 649 (D.D.N.Y. 1923)

¹⁰⁴ See, Samuel R. Gross, *Lost lives: Miscarriages of Justice in Capital Cases*. 62 L. & CONT. PROB. 125 (1998).

reinvestigate or further investigate the underlying case, review the adequacy of the initial legal representation, and otherwise ferret out problems. By the time the collateral review is concluded, any possible problem with the fairness of the conviction should have been fully exposed and thoroughly vetted. Because capital cases receive such “intense scrutiny,” no stone should be unturned, no issue ignored, no problem neglected.

Our study of the case of Robin Lovitt offers a striking counter-example that challenges this common perception. We have shown that serious problems with the key scientific evidence in a capital case, problems that raise doubts about the accuracy of the verdict, went unrecognized and unremedied. Without careful attention to this failure of the justice system, and meaningful reform, the danger exists that Judge Hand’s unreal dream could become a waking nightmare for a falsely convicted capital defendant.