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The failure of FORENSICS

Jim Fisher takes us into the real world of homicide investigation

Review by Dan Morey
Contributing writer

On TV, it's elementary. A couple investigators poke at a corpse and crack cheap one-liners. Their subordinates collect samples of various bodily fluids. Back at the lab, there's a gratuitous autopsy, more fiddling with fluids and finally a car chase, at the end of which the cops get their killer.

But is this the way it works in the real world of homicide investigation? Not often, according to Jim Fisher, a retired criminal science instructor at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and author of *"Forensics Under Fire: Are Bad Science and Dueling Experts Corrupting Criminal Justice?"* (Rutgers University Press, \$24.95).

"I've spent most of my adult life investigating crime," Fisher writes in his preface, "... teaching criminal investigation, writing about the subject, and trying to figure out why so many serious crimes in the United States either go unsolved or lead to wrongful convictions."

His conclusions are pretty bleak, unless you happen to be a murderer.

"There are more sudden, violent and

unexplained deaths in the United States than the nation's four hundred board-certified forensic pathologists can handle. This gruesome workload would require at least a thousand.

"As a result, not every death that calls for an autopsy gets one. ... This means we don't know exactly how many people ... are murdered every year. And of the cases we know are homicides, about 40 percent go unsolved."

In *"Forensics Under Fire,"* Fisher — a former FBI agent — examines a number of homicide cases gone wrong. Some of the investigations are little known to the public, while others, like the JonBenet Ramsey murder, are familiar to anyone who's waited in line at a supermarket.

Throughout, Fisher debunks the supposed infallibility of DNA and other types

of identification. He also questions the credibility of so-called expert witnesses.

Among his "rogue's gallery of run-amok pathologists" is Dr. Ralph Erdmann, who performed more than 3,000 autopsies in a decade of practice, eagerly tailoring his results to fit the needs of prosecuting attorneys.

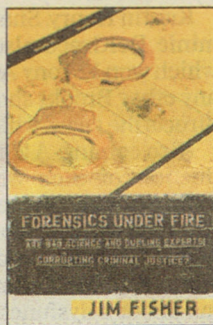
In the year following the suspension of Erdmann's medical license, the extent of his corruption came to light.

"The panel of experts who had looked at three hundred of his autopsy reports — a relatively small sampling — found that one-third of the bodies had not even been cut open."

But Erdmann's dishonesty and incompetence didn't always work in the prosecution's favor.

"In another body-in-the-dumpster case, Dr. Erdmann lost the dead man's head, the body part containing the bullet that would have connected the suspect to the crime."

When's the last time you saw *that* on "CSI"?



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