making a mark in
Forensic Science
It’s come a long way — from fingerprints to DNA. But despite the recent hype about forensic science and its legal applications, it’s not really new. And according to John Rago, it’s nothing less than the eternal search for truth.

Rago, associate dean of the Duquesne University School of Law, directs the University’s Cyril H. Wecht Institute of Forensic Science and Law. “The emergence of forensic science and law is really no emergence at all,” Rago asserts. “It is a union of thought that has largely been unexercised.”

Some observers mark the fall 2000 debut of the TV series “CSI” as the spark that ignited popular interest in forensics, but Rago says the issue is timeless and caught the public’s eye several years earlier with the O.J. Simpson case.

The seeds of Duquesne’s emphasis on forensic science and law were planted in 1995, when the Law School held a program for state appellate jurists. “It was right on the heels of O.J.,” Rago recalls. “We were amazed by the reaction of the court. They thought it was wonderful; they wanted more of it.” The idea of expanding the program remained a topic of conversation around the Law School for a few more years until Wecht, an adjunct professor at Duquesne since 1962, put the issue on the front burner in 1999.

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“As I looked around the country, I was amazed that not a single law school was doing anything in terms of forensic science and the law,” Rago said. “While there were a few scattered programs, no institution had made a full-scale, interdisciplinary commitment to these areas of study.”

By the fall of 2000, the same season in which “CSI” hit the air, Duquesne announced the formation of the Wecht Institute.

A Recognized Brand

Duquesne’s programs are built on the strengths of its schools and on a recognized brand name — Wecht. The Allegheny County coroner holds degrees in both law and medicine and is frequently consulted by investigators, prosecutors, defense attorneys — and the reporters who cover them — in high-profile cases ranging from Simpson and JonBenet Ramsey to last year’s Laci Peterson murder. Wecht chairs a 23-member advisory board that includes former Los Angeles Coroner Thomas Noguchi, noted forensic scientists Henry Lee and James Starrs, New York State Police investigator Michael Baden, and Simpson defense “Dream Team” members Barry Scheck and Johnnie Cochran. More than just impressive names in a brochure, these renowned experts guide curriculum development and participate as faculty and presenters in the Wecht Institute’s academic programs and conferences.

In just three years, the Wecht Institute has spawned thought-provoking annual conferences, a unique five-year bachelor’s/master’s program, an interdisciplinary certificate program aimed at a wide range of professionals, and master’s and certificate programs in forensic nursing. The Law School has joined a national effort using forensic advances in criminal defense. Emphasized in the University’s 2003 – 2008 Strategic Plan, a number of other forensics programs are in development, positioning Duquesne as a national leader in a growing field.

Bachelor’s/Master’s Program

Duquesne offers the only program in America with a seamless progression from bachelor’s to master’s degrees and an equal balance of rigorous science and law components, according to Dr. Frederick Fochtman, P ’65, GP ’72, program director.

Fochtman, an associate professor of pharmacology-toxicology in the Mylan School of Pharmacy and director of the Forensic Laboratory Division for the Allegheny County Coroner’s Office, has a hit on his hands. “When we first sat down to plan the program, we looked at the possibility of 20 students a year coming in,” Fochtman remembers. The 2001 entering class numbered 30 students; 50
students followed the next year and 70 new students joined the ranks this fall. The five-year, 158-credit program, administered by the Bayer School of Natural and Environmental Sciences, demands high standards from freshman applicants, including a high school GPA of 3.0 or higher, SAT scores of at least 1100 and a minimum of seven courses in math and sciences.

The input of the Wecht Institute’s advisory board helped Duquesne construct a curriculum that meets changing needs in a variety of professions. While the first wave of master’s students won’t graduate until 2005, they will be prepared for a variety of job opportunities in settings including federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, crime labs, morgues, academic institutions, law firms, corporations, health care providers or independent consulting.

“From my experience and contacts with people across the country who are involved with forensics, I can tell you the field is ready for an infusion of very well educated individuals coming out of a program such as this one,” Fochtman said.

Certificate Program

The Wecht Institute’s 12-credit certificate program is both a stand-alone offering and the cornerstone of all current and future graduate programs in Forensic Science and Law. The program consists of 168 class hours (including laboratory sessions) held on Saturdays over a nine-month period. The broad curriculum includes an overview of the legal system, the functions of the forensic scientist, criminal law and forensic scientific procedures, civil applications of forensic science, and trial preparation and tactics.

Students also prepare a research paper under faculty supervision, take part in seminars on research and writing skills and attend the Institute’s annual conference.

Law School and other University faculty members, advisory board members and guest lecturers representing a variety of professions teach courses. The diversity among instructors is reflected in the students as well.

“We thought we would start as a small idea appealing to people in law enforcement,” Rago said. “But we’ve also enrolled teachers, social workers, businesspeople, scientists, nurses and other health professionals.” These professionals are looking to bring new areas of expertise to their existing careers.

The broad participation also mirrors the program’s ultimate goal. “Law, the natural, applied and social sciences all have forensic applications. But if you study them in a vacuum, they have no contextual meaning,” Rago said. “The more disciplines you bring into any discourse, the closer you get to finding the truth in a more reliable fashion.”

Forensic Nursing

The School of Nursing offers a 36-credit master of science degree with a forensics concentration and an 18-credit post-master’s certificate, both built around the Wecht Institute’s certificate program.

“Forensic nursing encompasses many clinical areas,” said Dr. L. Kathleen Sekula, assistant professor of Nursing. Forensic nurses detect and investigate signs of violent trauma in emergency rooms in cases of child, spousal or elder abuse. They also perform similar functions in day care centers, domestic violence shelters and nursing homes.
Another category of forensic nurse is the legal nurse expert. “These are usually nurses who currently practice in a specialty area, such as obstetrics, who are called upon to study records in cases and often testify for one side or another in a legal proceeding,” Sekula explained.

A third area of forensic nursing includes SANEs (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners). According to Sekula, SANEs are specially trained to assess rape victims. “They know how to collect evidence, keep the evidence possession chain clear, document the patient’s statements, while also tending to the patient’s physical needs,” Sekula said.

Other specialties include psychiatric forensic nurses, who work with both victims and perpetrators of violence, and nurses who serve as death examiners.

While there are many professional possibilities, Sekula stresses that Duquesne’s programs are ahead of the curve. “I tell our students this is an emerging field. They’re going to be the ones who write the job descriptions for these new areas of practice.” Sekula hopes that eventually all hospitals will have a forensic nurse on staff.

A unique aspect of the nursing programs is that both are offered online to students across the country. “About 75 percent of our students are from outside of the Pittsburgh area,” Sekula reports. Students hail from areas as far away as Florida, South Dakota, Texas and Oklahoma. “Some are in very rural areas, taking what they learn to places where forensic nurses are extremely rare,” she said.

There are only a handful of graduate forensic nursing programs in the nation, and again, Duquesne’s stands alone with its strong foundation in law. The Health Resources and Services Administration of the federal Department of Health and Human Services recently awarded
Duquesne’s nursing forensics program one of only two Advanced Education Nursing Program Grants. Sekula says the $825,000 three-year grant will be used to strengthen and expand forensic nursing offerings.

The Innocence Project
Since 1993, more than 130 prisoners nationwide have had their convictions overturned and been released from life imprisonment or death sentences based on DNA evidence or other new findings. Recently, Illinois Governor George Ryan commuted the sentences of 160 condemned inmates, calling the death penalty system, “incurably flawed.”

One of the leading advocates for re-examining questionable convictions is Wecht Institute advisory board member Barry Scheck. Known for his work in the Simpson case, Scheck is also the founder of the Innocence Project at New York’s Cardozo School of Law. About two dozen other law schools have joined his network, and this fall Duquesne becomes the first Pennsylvania law school to establish an Innocence Project.

The Innocence Project will be an in-house, DNA-driven clinic in which students will gain hands-on experience investigating cases and representing clients. Since Pennsylvania has the nation’s fourth-largest prison population, Rago expects hundreds of cases to be referred. Procedures are in place to review the cases and determine which clients to represent.

The Annual Conference
Another aspect of Duquesne’s involvement in forensic and legal issues is the annual Wecht Institute Conference. The inaugural symposium, held in 2001, focused on “DNA and the Law,” with national experts examining both the myths and facts surrounding the use of DNA evidence. Last year’s program (co-sponsored by the University’s Family Institute) looked at preventing, detecting and responding to various types of family violence, from child to elder abuse, and included a multi-denominational forum on clergy sexual abuse.

The 2003 conference, scheduled for Nov. 20-23, will examine “The Great American Murder Mystery” — the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Coinciding with the 40th anniversary of the fateful day in Dallas, the program will shine the light of modern forensic science on this still-controversial case.

Neurosurgeon Robert Grossman, who examined Kennedy at Parkland Hospital, is among the scheduled presenters. Other participants include both Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., who, as counsel to the Warren Commission, authored the controversial “single-bullet” theory, and Wecht, an outspoken critic of the theory. Zachary Sklar, journalist and co-author of the screenplay for Oliver Stone’s film “JFK,” is also scheduled to appear.
Just the Beginning

Rago is confident of further growth. “With the Strategic Plan’s mandate and support from top University officials, discussions are under way toward the development of more graduate programs that we hope to announce in 2004,” Rago said.

Among the schools involved are Natural and Environmental Sciences, Business and Liberal Arts, with programs envisioned in such areas as accounting, computer sciences, toxicology, biology, chemistry and the social sciences.

The Wecht Institute has also been tapped by CRC Publishing to produce what Rago calls “the definitive textbook on forensic science and law.” Wecht and Rago will co-edit the volume and have solicited submissions from dozens of renowned authors.

The combination of various disciplines with substantial legal content and input from Wecht and his network of experts uniquely positions Duquesne for distinction in the field. “We’re well on our way to building a cadre of programs that in five years’ time can be a national and international leader in forensic science and law education,” Rago said.

For more information on forensic science and law programs at Duquesne University, visit www.forensics.duq.edu. For details on this year’s Wecht Institute Conference, visit www.jfk.duq.edu.

Duquesne Leads the Way with a Master of Accountancy Degree with a Forensic Focus

Responding to the increasing demand for professionals with the skills of accountant and forensic specialist, the John F. Donahue Graduate School of Business at Duquesne University will soon become the nation’s only graduate business school offering a Master of Accountancy (MAcc) degree program with a focus on forensic accounting.

Along with the two other specializations in the MAcc program (Taxation and Securities and Exchange Reporting), the Forensic Accounting track deepens the school’s commitment to offering a graduate curriculum with a focus on applied research and knowledge.

The program is slated to begin admitting students for classes in May 2004. For more information, contact Dr. Sharon Green, 412-396-5474, or green@duq.edu.