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Editorial: The Brits say enough

February 24, 2007

California's state-run DNA laboratory is facing a huge backlog of untested samples. It is not alone among states falling behind.

The logjam here so alarmed a state commission looking into criminal justice reform that it has called on lawmakers to provide emergency funding so more lab technicians can be hired immediately.

As of Jan. 31, more than two years after voters OK'd expansion of DNA testing, the California Department of Justice had completed testing on about 740,000 swab samples. However, it still had almost 160,000 untested samples, according to a report released Tuesday by the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice.

While the backlog is expected to drop to 60,000 by midyear, the state lab anticipates receiving 240,000 new samples annually until 2009, when DNA samples will be required from every adult arrested on felony charges, increasing that number to 400,000 a year, the report states.

Without the new hires, the state crime lab will continue to fall further behind in building a statewide database that will help local detectives clear unsolved crimes.

It was such a database that allowed Ventura County detectives to solve the 2001 rape and murder of 18-year-old Crystal Hamilton. Douglas Dworak was arrested after his DNA was entered into the state database and matched samples found in the Hamilton case.

The crime might have gone unsolved, except Mr. Dworak had given a DNA sample for another rape conviction years earlier in Northern California and it had been entered into the state database.

Ventura County District Attorney Greg Totten has previously estimated the county has 200 to 300 unsolved crimes in which DNA evidence might help identify the perpetrator. Most of these cases involve murder, sexual assaults or rape.

Although it has been shown that DNA can ensure the right person is arrested and convicted for heinous crimes, it can also be used to set the innocent free.

The commission was right to call for the urgent DNA funding. Making our streets safer and preventing wrongful convictions are at stake. Now it's up to legislators to find money for the new hires, and quickly.

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