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Backgrounder 6: The Centre for Forensic Research's Evolution

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For forensic anthropologist Mark Skinner, the opening of the Centre for Forensic Research is a dream come true. For 25 years he has yearned for laboratory space that could integrate the expertise and research of the many SFU researchers interested in analysing and identifying recent human remains to determine how and when the person died.

'It has taken my lifetime,' says the 61-year-old professor whose expertise at identifying skeletal remains is often used by the BC Coroner's Service. Now, after three years of design and construction, he is working in a centre that meets the needs of SFU's team of forensic researchers, including botanists, entomologists, archaeometrists, criminologists and molecular biologists. Here, researchers not only pursue new advances in crime-solving techniques but also work with police and coroners to use those techniques in solving cases.

That's why many of the centre's labs are outfitted with an ultra-high security system that includes chain-of-evidence controls so that analysis and research may be used in law courts. The massive job of designing the centre fell to Andrew Barton, a physical anthropologist and technical advisor with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, who worked with faculty and staff to accomplish the task.

The centre includes a forensic osteology lab for examinations of routine skeletal remains and an autopsy facility complete with walk-in cold storage lockers, decontamination equipment and remote imagery capability for safely handling human remains that may harbour serious diseases. Built to biocontainment level 3 standards, the facility 'also allows us to process pig remains used in experimental simulations of forensic situations,' says Skinner.

In the DNA extraction lab, with its contamination controls and state-of-the-art clean-air technology, associate professor Dongya Yang will continue his painstaking research into the science of extracting DNA particles from ancient and forensic skeletal remains and then, in the case of forensic remains, matching the DNA with that of living relatives. The centre includes basic chemistry labs for archaeology students and researchers—a first for the archaeology department. In the near future, Skinner hopes to obtain funding for new digital radiography equipment and micro-CT scanners for visualizing and recreating detailed internal structures of forensic materials such as bones and teeth. There is an insect-breeding room and environmental chambers for criminologist Gail Anderson's forensic entomology work, as well as a high-security entomology casework room which holds insect evidence collected from crime scenes for analysis.

A zooarchaeology lab houses a collection of hundreds of skeletons of fish, birds and mammals, as well as thousands of marine shells, all used by researchers to identify ancient remains from archaeological sites.

Overall, says Skinner, 'this is a centre of learning for us; a place where we can talk to each other and reach out to other forensic scientists here and abroad and work together to secure better identifications, better prosecutions and more justice for families of victims as well as accused persons for whom there is always an initial presumption of innocence.'

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