

Promoting Research in Forensic Psychiatry

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He that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils; for time is the greatest innovator.—Francis Bacon¹

The credibility and recognition of any specialty is based to a great extent on its research foundation.² Research helps to reveal answers to the basic questions about a specialty, including the diagnosis and treatment of its patients; the effectiveness and efficiency of its educational, research, and clinical service programs; the number of physicians it should have; and the training and experience required for physicians to be considered its practitioners.

While forensic psychiatry has a long history, it has only recently been formally recognized by the American Board of Medical Specialties.³ As a relatively new specialty, forensic psychiatry has very significant research needs.⁴ Unfortunately, even though the popularity of forensic psychiatry is at an all-time high,⁵ we are currently in an era when it is very difficult to establish a new research agenda in any specialty. Medical research has traditionally been funded by a combination of federal, state, and private resources, as well as by revenues generated by clinical services.⁶ New research has often been initiated by shifting resources to pilot projects from existing research programs or clinical services. Threats currently exist to the integrity of each of the traditional sources of research funding,⁷ and any proposed revenue shifting will likely be subject to intense scrutiny.

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Being a relatively new specialty that is often poorly understood and unappreciated by many funding sources and academic administrators, forensic psychiatry is at a significant competitive disadvantage in the research marketplace.

I believe the significant requirements that exist for forensic research and the current realities of the competitive research arena suggest the need for the specialty to adopt a carefully designed approach to the promotion of forensic research. The scope of this type of endeavor mandates its support at a national level by organizations positioned to do so (e.g., American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law (AAPL), American Psychiatric Association (APA), Psychiatric Residency Review Committee (PRRC)). In this article, I will briefly present a recommended process that identifies core principles for forensic research, outlines the goals and objectives of a forensic research agenda, and proposes an action plan to fulfill them that includes specific strategies as well as organizational responsibilities for each objective. I then describe how an AAPL Education and Research Institute might help AAPL implement the action plan and fulfill its responsibilities to promote forensic research in the new health care era.

Basic Principles for Forensic Research

Any strategic process should be well-grounded in basic principles that form a philosophical framework for the entire enterprise.⁸ These principles will guide the development of all subsequent activities, including the identification of strategic goals and objectives as well as any proposed action plans. I recommend

that any strategic process to promote forensic research be based on at least the following six core principles.

1. *Quality.* All forensic research programs must be well-designed endeavors that are academically rigorous and employ state-of-the-art methods (e.g., research design, statistical techniques).

2. *Integrity.* Adherence to all applicable regulations and requirements must be an inherent characteristic of modern forensic research (e.g., human subjects review, research compliance).

3. *Relevance.* Forensic research must be directed toward addressing the problems that plague those systems most in need (e.g., public psychiatry, corrections, juvenile justice) and toward illuminating the importance of forensic psychiatry to the overall medical system (e.g., effectiveness and efficiency studies).

4. *Comprehensiveness.* Forensic research must focus on all important areas of the specialty (e.g., basic science, clinical, health services, practice guidelines, workforce).

5. *Collaboration.* Forensic researchers must establish linkages between themselves as well as with other professionals (e.g., multi-research team cooperation, multidisciplinary research).

6. *Endorsement.* Forensic research must be supported by a variety of state, federal, and private organizations and donors (e.g., multisource funding).

Goals and Objectives for Forensic Research

With the above six core principles as a guiding foundation, what should be the goals and objectives of a strategy to promote forensic research? I believe there should be two rather straightforward major strategic goals for forensic research: first, to increase the number of qualified forensic researchers, and second, to increase the quantity and quality of the body of forensic research.

To accomplish these two broad goals, I believe forensic psychiatry must pursue at least the following eight specific objectives concerning research.

1. Increase the research expertise of graduating forensic psychiatrists.

2. Improve the research expertise of existing forensic researchers.

3. Expand the knowledge of forensic researchers about applicable research rules and regulations.

4. Identify and prioritize the research needs of forensic systems.

5. Promote comprehensive forensic research agendas.

6. Encourage multidisciplinary research.

7. Facilitate collaboration between forensic research teams.

8. Secure increased funding for forensic research.

An Action Plan to Fulfill Forensic Research Goals and Objectives

In this section, I will present an action plan to help fulfill the forensic research goals and objectives listed above. Selected strategies will be outlined for each objective, as well as the organizations that I believe should be at least partially responsible to implement them. In this short report, it is not possible to list every important strategy for each objective. Rather, I will identify those strategies that seem most pertinent to me at this time.

1. Increase the research expertise of graduating forensic psychiatrists.

- *Strategy.* Increase the amount of research training required in forensic residencies, and develop forensic research fellowship programs.

- *Responsibility.* PRRC; forensic residency programs; AAPL.

2. Improve the research expertise of existing forensic researchers.

- *Strategy.* Expand continuing education programs on research topics for forensic psychiatrists, and present examples of the structure and function of successful research programs.

- *Responsibility.* AAPL; APA.

3. Expand the knowledge of forensic researchers about applicable research rules and regulations.

- *Strategy.* Develop educational forums directed toward research compliance issues, and present examples of compliant and problematic research programs.

- *Responsibility.* AAPL; APA.

4. Identify and prioritize the research needs of forensic systems.

- *Strategy.* Survey the leaders of forensic systems about their needs, and conduct focused site visits of forensic programs.

- *Responsibility.* AAPL.

5. Promote comprehensive forensic research agendas.

- *Strategy.* Convene forums of forensic researchers to identify basic science, clinical, health services, practice guideline, and workforce issues requiring investigation, and develop specific research plans to address them.
- *Responsibility.* AAPL.

6. Encourage multidisciplinary research.

- *Strategy.* Convene forums of multidisciplinary forensic researchers to identify possibilities for collaboration, and fund seed grants requiring multidisciplinary participation.
- *Responsibility.* AAPL.

7. Facilitate collaboration between research teams.

- *Strategy.* Convene forums of research teams working on similar forensic issues, and fund seed grants requiring multi-team participation.
- *Responsibility.* AAPL.

8. Secure increased funding for forensic research.

- *Strategy.* Implement a specific development plan to raise revenue to support forensic research, and advocate for increased research funding from state, federal, and private sources.
- *Responsibility.* AAPL.

Implementing the Action Plan with an AAPL Education and Research Institute

As noted earlier, the scope of the approach described above is such that it will need the support of national organizations to succeed. When considering issues pertaining to forensic psychiatry, for all practical purposes this means AAPL. While other organizations such as the APA can perhaps be helpful, without the active involvement of AAPL, I do not believe that any complex process such as this will succeed. For example, in the previous section I suggest that AAPL should be at least partly responsible for meeting the first three forensic research objectives and mainly responsible for meeting the last five.

If AAPL does indeed shoulder the bulk of the responsibility for promoting forensic research in the future, how should it fulfill that obligation? I suggest that an AAPL Education and Research Institute

might well be the structure that could help AAPL accomplish its task. As previously described in the AAPL Newsletter,⁹ I believe the major rationale for an AAPL Education and Research Institute is that it would enable AAPL to assume a more proactive role in promoting the development of forensic educational and research programs of excellence. Other professional organizations (e.g., APA) and institutions (e.g., universities) have adopted similar strategies to promote their educational and/or research agendas. They have found that carefully structured institutes are more adaptive and better positioned to take advantage of funding opportunities and to stimulate academic programs than traditional professional organizations and academic bureaucracies.

If organized with care to support the mission of AAPL, an AAPL Education and Research Institute could facilitate the support of forensic educational and research programs by private industry and donors. A major part of its activities would focus on creative fund-raising to help ensure that adequate resources were available to support many of the forensic educational and research objectives listed above. For example, it could fund continuing education programs on research, forums to promote forensic research, forensic research fellowships, and focused seed grant programs designed to encourage multidisciplinary forensic research and collaborations between independent forensic research teams. While no easy undertaking to develop or administer, I believe that a properly structured AAPL Education and Research Institute may hold the key to the future success of forensic research endeavors.

Conclusion

I believe that the realities of the current health care era underscore the significant need for forensic research and also make it very difficult to achieve. To make headway in these uncertain times, a carefully designed process to promote forensic research is needed. By clarifying underlying core principles to guide the forensic research effort, developing specific forensic research goals and objectives, and implementing an action plan to achieve them, forensic psychiatry can improve the likelihood that it will have the research foundation it needs to thrive as a medical specialty in the 21st century. The scope of this complicated undertaking mandates that a national organization step forward to take the lead in

promoting forensic research. AAPL is the only logical choice to fill this crucial role, and it will need help to do so. A carefully designed AAPL Education and Research Institute might well provide the support AAPL needs to fulfill its responsibilities to forensic research in the new health care era.

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