

## **UFS lecturer serves on National Forensic Oversight and Ethics Board**

Previously, when DNA evidence was collected at a crime scene, it was analysed only when requested by the prosecutor or investigator when they had found a suspect and needed confirmation. With the new DNA Act, all samples collected from violent crimes must be analysed. The profiles will be compared with a convicted offender database to see if some of the unsolved cases can be linked to these perpetrators. The reason for this is that many of these offenders are repeat offenders, and this process will increase the chances of solving cases successfully.

Dr Karin Ehlers, lecturer in the Department of Genetics at the University of the Free State, was elected by the Minister of Police, Mr Nkosinathi Nhleko, to serve on the National Forensic Oversight and Ethics Board which will, among others, monitor the implementation of the provisions of the DNA Act.

Serving on the Board, Dr Ehlers will also have the opportunity to contribute to proposals on:

- the improvement of practices regarding the overall operations of the National Forensic DNA Database (NFDD),
- the ethical, legal, and social implications of the use of forensic DNA profiles, and
- the training and the development of criteria for the use of familial searches.

Board members will also receive and assess complaints about alleged violations relating to the abuse of DNA samples and forensic DNA profiles and/or security breaches, and will report to complainants in respect thereof.

In 2014, when all citizens in South Africa were invited to apply for a position on the National Forensic Oversight and Ethics Board, Dr Ehlers submitted her application with a motivation on how she could contribute to the function of the Board. She is one of ten persons who were appointed to serve on the Board. "The reason I was successful was due to my involvement in the development of the UFS Forensic Sciences Programme," Dr Ehlers said.

At the opening of the Platteklouf Forensic laboratory in Cape Town, the need for a forensic sciences programme at a tertiary institute was highlighted by the Minister of Police. This need was also confirmed at the second Southern African Forensic DNA Conference, hosted by Interpol and SAPS in 2011.

In 2010, in collaboration with the DNA Project, the Department of Genetics at the UFS established the BScHons degree in Forensic Genetics, which, at that time, was the first of its kind in South Africa. Today, students at the UFS can specialise in either Forensic Genetics, Forensic Sciences, Forensic Chemistry, or Forensic Entomology at all post-graduate levels (BSc Hons; MSc and PhD),.

Furthermore, classes for undergraduate students in the BSc. degree in Forensic Sciences started in 2014. "We are currently the only university in Africa that presents such a BSc degree," said Dr Ehlers.

Her involvement in forensics is not only in teaching but also in research. Dr Ehlers' current research focuses on molecular phenotyping, wildlife forensics, and forensic entomology.

"I used to work at the Animal Research Council at Irene, Pretoria where I was involved with a research project on cross-species STR (short tandem repeat) markers for forensic purposes. Due to poaching and the illegal trading of endangered species, the need for DNA markers for various wildlife species increased. Since I started working at the UFS, I've included my knowledge of forensic sciences in many of the modules I've presented. I've come to realise how great the need is for training for forensic scientists. Not just for the forensic laboratories, but also for the persons who attend to the crime scene itself.

Technology is changing very rapidly and so to keep up with the changes, people with the right skills need to be trained. With the new DNA Act, the workload will increase dramatically. The capacity of the country was one of the challenges that had to be overcome for this Act to take effect. "The UFS was able to

address this problem and make a real difference in the fight against crime. It is a real privilege to form part of this project," said Dr Ehlers.

**Dr Karin Ehlers.**

Photo: Leonie Bolleers