



Profiles	Forensic science
Name	Jennifer McDaid
Age	28
Job	Forensic scientist

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Career path and qualifications so far

After taking A Levels in Maths, Physics, Chemistry and Art, I studied for a Chemistry degree at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. On graduating, I went on to gain an MSc in Forensic Science from the University of Strathclyde. As part of my Masters degree I spent three months conducting research at Florida International University in collaboration with the US Drug Enforcement Administration. Following this, I joined Hayward Associates Consulting Forensic Scientists five years ago as a trainee forensic scientist. After a period of on-the-job training, I started to take on my own casework. I am now a consulting forensic scientist specialising in the examination of footwear marks, glass and alcohol related matters.

Has anything you've done been especially useful in your career?

During my Chemistry degree great emphasis was placed on developing analytical and problem-solving skills. These skills have greatly assisted me when tackling casework.

What is a forensic scientist?

Forensic scientists use their scientific knowledge to assist in legal proceedings. After an examination of items submitted to the laboratory, they present their findings to the court in the form of a report or witness statement. Depending on the circumstances of the case, they may be asked to attend court to give evidence in person.

Day to day activities

In criminal matters, forensic scientists can undertake work for the prosecution or the defence. At Hayward Associates we undertake work on behalf of the defence.

Consulting forensic scientists are instructed by solicitors who require an examination to be conducted on behalf of their client. Normally, this involves a review of work that has been carried out by the forensic scientist instructed by the prosecution. We attend the laboratory where the prosecution work was carried out in order to re-examine the relevant items. We then interpret the scientific findings taking into account any explanations given by the defendant.

My day to day activities vary throughout the week. The majority of my time is spent in the office writing reports and preparing for laboratory visits. Other days I may be carrying out a laboratory visit or attending court as an expert witness.

Why did you choose your current job?

In the final year of my Chemistry degree I became interested in the idea of training as a forensic scientist after reading a careers advice booklet published by the Royal Society of Chemistry. The university careers adviser suggested that I visit a local forensic science consultancy to meet some forensic scientists. I quickly realised that the job is nothing like it is portrayed on the television, but I was not put off. I was keen to apply my scientific skills in a practical way and felt that a career in forensic science would be very rewarding.

The thought of a varied working week appealed to me greatly. Although I enjoy laboratory work, I did not want to be solely based in a laboratory. I was excited by the idea that I could be involved in a case right from the outset – at the crime scene – through to its conclusion in court.

Does your job involve travel or activities outside the office/laboratory?

My job involves a considerable amount of travel throughout the UK. On average, I would say that I spend two days a week out of the office carrying out laboratory visits and attending court.

Further qualifications

After three years experience as a court reporting scientist, I was eligible to apply for registration with the Council for the Registration of Forensic Practitioners (CRFP). The CRFP is a professional regulatory body that manages a register of currently competent forensic practitioners.

What do you most enjoy about your job?

I enjoy the variety I experience within my working day. One day I may be working on a motoring offence, the next day a murder. Since every case is different, I never stop learning.

Although attending court as a witness is often a nerve-racking experience, it can be very satisfying knowing that you have helped the court to understand a complicated scientific issue. Meeting members of the legal profession is also interesting and can be very useful in assessing my ability to communicate my findings clearly.

Working for the defence provides me with the opportunity to meet scientists employed by other laboratories. It is very interesting to observe the manner in which different laboratories handle the same type of case.

What skills do you need, other than your scientific knowledge?

One of the most important skills a forensic scientist requires is the ability to communicate effectively both verbally and in writing. Conducting a detailed scientific investigation is worthless if the findings cannot be communicated clearly to the court. This can be quite challenging, as the members of the jury may have little or no scientific training.

Have you got any advice for people wishing to enter your career area?

Although many universities now offer degrees in Forensic Science, I would advise anyone hoping to pursue a career in forensic science to obtain a degree in Biology, Chemistry or a related subject. Forensic science is a very competitive field with limited opportunities for employment. Keeping your options open by studying a core science subject means that many more careers will be available should you later decide that forensic science is not for you.

Although opportunities to obtain work experience in forensic laboratories are few and far between due to the sensitive nature of the work, it is worthwhile gaining experience within a laboratory environment.

Although it is not an entry requirement, an MSc in Forensic Science can be very useful in securing employment as a forensic scientist. The skills and knowledge I gained as a result of my MSc have been invaluable. As well as providing in depth coverage of the scientific aspects of the subject, many courses also offer courtroom training and the opportunity of a research placement within a forensic laboratory.

Is a science degree essential for your area of work?

Yes. In order to train as a court reporting forensic scientist, a degree in Biology, Chemistry or a related subject is a basic requirement. As forensic science is so competitive, many applicants also possess postgraduate qualifications.

Examples of other career opportunities in this area

Other job opportunities related to forensics include: forensic development manager, medical research associate, medical examiner, crime laboratory analyst, crime scene examiner, pathologist, forensic chemist, toxicologist, pharmacologist, analytical chemist, biomedical scientist, clinical biochemist and research scientist.

Further information/contacts

The Forensic Science Society Tel: 01423 506068 www.forensic-science-society.org.uk

Forensic Science Service www.forensic.gov.uk

For further information on careers in the chemical sciences contact:

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