



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FORENSIC SCIENCE

NIST
National Institute of
Standards and Technology
U.S. Department of Commerce

Recommendations to the Attorney General Regarding Pretrial Discovery

Subcommittee
Reporting and Testimony
Status
Final Draft

Date of Current Version	08/05/2016
Approved by Subcommittee	11/05/2016
Approved by Commission	[dd/mm/yy]
Action by Attorney General	[dd/mm/yy]

Recommendations

The National Commission on Forensic Science recommends that the Attorney General take the following actions:

Recommendation #1: The Attorney General should direct federal prosecutors when they intend to offer expert testimony on forensic science test results and conclusions to provide to the court and defense counsel, reasonably in advance of trial, a report prepared by this expert that contains:

- (i) a statement of all opinions the witness will express and the basis and reasons for them;**
- (ii) the facts or data considered by the witness in forming them;**
- (iii) any exhibits that will be used to summarize or support them;**
- (iv) the witness’s qualifications, including a list of all publications authored in the previous 10 years;**
- (v) a list of all other cases in which, during the previous 4 years, the witness testified as an expert at trial or by deposition; and**
- (vi) a statement of the compensation to be paid the witness.**

With three modifications, this Recommendation tracks Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 26(a)(2)(B). Because of speedy trial and case management concerns, “reasonably in advance of trial” has been substituted for the 90-days-before-trial disclosure requirement of the Civil Rule, but the Commission expects that “reasonably in advance of trial” will usually mean at least a few weeks before trial and with sufficient time for the defense to consult with and/or secure expert assistance. Also, while the Civil Rule requires “a complete statement of all opinions,” the Recommendation excises the word “complete” in the belief that it is at best confusing and at worst unnecessarily burdensome. Finally, the Commission intends that the listing requirement of (v) take effect prospectively, as not all forensic experts may have kept such lists in the past.

Recommendation #2: The Attorney General should direct federal prosecutors to allow the defendant full access to the expert’s case record.

Since depositions of an adversary's expert witnesses are not permitted in federal criminal cases, access to the expert's underlying case record is proposed in order to mitigate the absence of discovery depositions and to allow the adversary party to examine the underlying data on which the expert's opinions are based (subject to any judicial protective order).

Recommendation #3: To the extent the aforementioned disclosures exceed what is presently required by federal law, the Attorney General should authorize federal prosecutors to condition such additional disclosures on the defense's agreeing to provide the same broad disclosures if the defense intends to offer forensic expert testimony.

Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 16(b)(1)(C) requires a defendant who intends to offer expert testimony to give the government the same kind of disclosure that the government is required to give the defendant under 16(a)(1)(G). But because the discovery proposed by the Commission's recommendations would go beyond what is required by 16(a)(1)(G), it seems only fair for the government, if it chooses, to condition such additional disclosure on the defendant's agreement that it will make the same broad disclosures if it intends to offer forensic expert testimony of its own (subject to any claim of privilege upheld by the court).

Commentary

The need for pretrial discovery of forensic evidence in criminal cases is critical—for both the prosecution and defense—because “it is difficult to test expert testimony at trial without advance notice and preparation.”¹ Indeed, in a number of the cases in which convicted defendants were subsequently exonerated by DNA testing, the failure to disclose exculpatory forensic evidence played a role in the wrongful convictions.² There are many other advantages to comprehensive discovery as well. Even in the case of DNA, according to President Bush's DNA Initiative, “[e]arly disclosure can have the following benefits: [1] Avoiding surprise and unnecessary delay. [2] Identifying the need for defense expert services. [3] Facilitating exoneration of the innocent and encouraging plea negotiations if DNA evidence confirms guilt.” These benefits likewise apply to other forensic evidence.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the great need for pretrial disclosure, discovery regarding forensic evidence intended to be offered in criminal cases is not required to be nearly as expansive or as timely as in civil litigation. Ironically, this is despite the fact that, under federal law, experts can be deposed in civil cases but not in criminal cases, so that the need for substantial pretrial written disclosure would seem to be even greater in criminal cases than in civil cases if trial by ambush is to be avoided. Historically, this disparity has been justified on three grounds: substantial pretrial discovery in criminal actions will (1) encourage perjury, (2) lead to the intimidation of witnesses, and (3) be a one-way street because of the Fifth Amendment privilege against self-incrimination.³ With forensic evidence, however, these traditional arguments against criminal discovery lose whatever force they might otherwise have. The first argument fails because “it is virtually impossible for evidence or information of this kind to be distorted or misused because of its advance disclosure.”⁴ Also, there is no evidence that the intimidation of experts is a major problem, both because in federal practice the expert is often a government employee and also because the evidence can often be reexamined, if necessary, by another expert.⁵ Finally, the Self-incrimination Clause, as presently interpreted by the Supreme Court, is not an impediment to the prosecution's obtaining pretrial discovery regarding forensic science that the defendant intends to offer.⁶

Although Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 16(a)(1)(G) requires the government, on defendant's

request, to provide a summary of a forensic expert's "opinions, the bases and reasons for those opinions, and the witness's qualifications," this provision, perhaps because of the aforementioned history, has often been narrowly interpreted by the government and the courts. By contrast, Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 26(a)(2) not only sets forth in much greater detail what disclosures regarding expert testimony must be made prior to trial but also provides that such disclosure, absent court order, must be made well in advance of trial. The need for meaningful and timely discovery in relation to expert testimony is particularly acute in the case of forensic science, where questionable forensic science has often gone unchallenged. The Commission is therefore of the view that the Attorney General, both as a matter of fairness and also in order to promote the accurate determination of the truth, should require her assistants to make pretrial disclosure of forensic science more in keeping with what the federal civil rules presently require than the more minimal requirements of the federal criminal rules. See Recommendation #1, above. Further, in the absence of depositions, the defendant should have access to the expert's case record. See Recommendation #2, above. Finally, to the extent permitted by law, the defense should also be reciprocally required to make these enhanced disclosures. See Recommendation #3, above.

It should be noted that the foregoing recommendations, designed to achieve the purposes summarized above, are a direct application to the particularities of federal practice of the Views Document on Discovery adopted by this Commission on August 11, 2015. Application to state practice might require different modifications.

¹ Fed. R. Crim. P. 16 (1975), advisory committee's note.

² See Brandon L. Garrett, *Convicting the Innocent: Where Criminal Prosecutions Go Wrong* 108 (2011).

³ See 2 Charles Alan Wright & Arthur R. Miller, *Federal Practice and Procedure* § 252, at 36-37 (2d ed. 1982).

⁴ Commentary, *ABA Standards for Criminal Justice, Discovery and Procedure Before Trial* 67 (Approved Draft 1970).

⁵ 2 Wayne LaFave & Jerod Israel, *Criminal Procedure* § 19.3, at 490 (1984) ("Once the report is prepared, the scientific expert's position is not readily influenced, and therefore disclosure presents little danger of prompting perjury or intimidation.").

⁶ See *Williams v. Florida*, 399 U.S. 78, 85 (1970) ("At most, the [discovery] rule only compelled petitioner to accelerate the timing of his disclosure, forcing him to divulge at an earlier date information that the petitioner from the beginning planned to divulge at trial."); *United States v. Nobles*, 422 U.S. 225, 234 (1975) (compelled production of defense investigator's notes does not violate Fifth Amendment because it involved no compulsion of the defendant).