

With the best of wishes

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ON THE IODINE TEST FOR SEMEN.¹

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If one were asked to instance a couple of medico-legal tests generally conceded to be sufficiently reliable to be accepted without hesitation as a positive proof of the condition they were presumed to indicate, one would not be unlikely to select as examples the hemin test in the case of blood stains and the recognition of spermatozoa in stains due to semen as fulfilling these requirements, when properly performed by competent persons.

While this is no doubt true, it has long been recognized that the technique at our disposal for the examination of spots supposed to consist of semen leaves very much to be desired.

It is by no means certain that all the stains sworn to from time to time as being seminal have really been such, so much does the testimony concerning these objects depend on the degree to which caution and experience have tempered the personal skill and acuteness of the expert. The identification of spermatozoa with absolute certainty, while easy enough in a fresh stain, becomes increasingly difficult with the lapse of time; and the incidental handling, washing or wearing of the articles of clothing, which commonly require this examination, makes it more and more problematical whether the spermatozoa can be demonstrated entire and intact.

There are numerous extraneous objects which are so like the detached heads and tails of spermatozoa as to mislead even those who are thoroughly experienced in the work. The generally accepted rule is that no body which simply resembles the head or tail of a spermatozoon should be considered as serious proof, and the search must be continued until perfectly formed and entire spermatozoa are recognized. The uncertainty produced by finding substances resembling these heads and tails in the specimens examined, may, however, lead the expert to prolong needlessly the examination of stains which are not seminal at all. Delays from this cause may have serious results in judicial procedure, simply by retarding or preventing the public exoneration of innocent persons wrongly suspected. We have also, on the other hand, the possible miscarriage of justice owing to the experts or juries attaching importance to incomplete proof, where the other circumstances of the case are such as to arouse strong suspicions, and must not lose sight of the consequences of abandoning a search for spermatozoa because they could not be promptly found.

¹ Read before the Society, October 3, 1896.