Human Bitemarks, NAS Report and Daubert

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“Bitemark Analysis: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly”

Dr. David Senn, D-ABFO
In Newsletter of the American Society of Forensic Odontology
Winter, 2007 edition
Bitemarks

- No database to quantify bitemarks or human dentition
- No ability to establish numerical probabilities
- No ability to research biting in living human skin
Bitemark Analysis

- Method of comparing tooth patterns left in skin and other inanimate objects to the teeth of a population of suspected biters

- One of the most controversial of all forensic scientific investigations
There is definite subjectivity in bitemark analysis.

This interpretative property of the science has lead to questions about the validity, accuracy and reliability of bitemark analysis.

National Academy of Science (NAS) report 2009
Bitemark Analysis

- Determine injury represents a bitemark
- Design and perform tests to evaluate the bitemark against a population of suspected biters
- Analysis leads to a preliminary opinion
- Re-Examination by independent second opinion
- Case Report
Bitemark Analysis: Scientific Methodology

- Hypothesis
- Testing design
- Testing methods
- Analysis of tests
- Opinion based on the testing
Dynamics of Biting

- Biting is not a static event

- Biting dynamics lead to different appearances of the bitemarks created by the same biter in cases involving multiple bitemarks
4 of more than 30 bitemarks from attack

Same biter causing all injuries at the same incident
Bitemarks

- Teeth may leave imprints when they bite something
- The imprints left during the biting may link to a specific biter
Bitemarks

- The object bitten typically will distort, particularly if the biting is in skin
Bitemark Patterns

- Movement during biting by either/both the biter and the object bitten can distort the recorded tooth patterns.

- This pattern of distortion often complicates the interpretation of the pattern as related to a biter.
Objects other than skin are sometimes bitten, which can also record bitemarks. This presentation only discusses bitemarks in human skin.
Bitemark Patterns

- Front teeth usually register first when biting. Depending on their length, some will touch the bitten object before others.

- After the first tooth penetrates a defined distance, the next tooth will begin to mark.

- Subsequent teeth follow with the biting depending on their height and position.
Bruising differences from teeth at different heights

Color photograph taken day of bite- heavy markings of lateral incisors and canines; faint markings of the central incisors

UV photograph taken 8 days after the bite showing all six lower anterior teeth are present
Models and the overlay
Wax bite and overlay

(Overlay intentionally flipped horizontally)
The resected tissue is examined using a light source that is shined through the excised tissue from the deepest sub-dermal regions toward the outer skin layer.
Transillumination
Photography

Color and black & white visible light photos

Digitally enhanced Black & white Visible light photo
Digital Imaging and Enhancement

Digitally enhanced ALI of shoulder

Black & white visible light photograph
Overlay on shoulder bitemark
Terms Indicating Degree of Confidence That an Injury is a Bitemark:

**Bitemark** - Teeth created the pattern; other possibilities were considered and excluded.
- *criteria*: pattern conclusively illustrates a) classic features. b) all the characteristics, or
c) typical class characteristics of dental arches and human teeth in proper arrangement so that it is recognizable as an impression of the human dentition.

**Suggestive** – The pattern is suggestive of a bitemark, but there is insufficient evidence to reach a definitive conclusion at this time.
- *criteria*: general shape and size are present but distinctive features such as tooth marks are missing, incomplete or distorted or a few marks resembling tooth marks are present but the arch configuration is missing.

**Not a bitemark** – Teeth did not create the pattern.
Descriptions and Terms Used to Relate Bitemark to the Suspected Biter:

Descriptors to indicate similarities between a bitemark and a person's dentition:

Biter

Probable biter

Cannot Exclude

Exclusion

Inconclusive

Bitemark Analysis: Basis

- Collective sets of teeth have visually different arrangements.
- In an ideal world, the patterns left by teeth in biting should relate to only one individual.
- In the real world, it can be more difficult to differentiate similar sets of dentitions.
- Bitemark evidence best used as adjunctive evidence or as a potential source of biter DNA.
Bitemark Analysis

- Most bitemarks analyzed are in human skin
- In an open population of suspected biters, little scientific evidence exists to say with any degree of certainty that the skin will record details of the biter’s teeth in such a way that a single suspected biter could reliably be identified
Bitemark Analysis

- A closed population of suspected biters with similar dentitions could not be discriminately separated in analysis with a bitemark in skin, even with a bitemark deemed to be of high forensic evidentiary value.

- Bitemarks in skin lacking individual characteristics of the biter’s teeth should not be used in bitemark analysis.
Bitemark Analysis

- Bitemarks of high evidentiary value in a closed population of suspected biters (n=2 or 3), each of whom present with significantly different dentitions, may be analyzed for discriminate inclusion/exclusion of a specific biter.
Mr. Timothy Smith
Suspect A
Upper Teeth

Suspect A
Upper Teeth
Profoundly different suspected biters’ teeth
Bitemark Analysis and the NAS report

“There is no evident reason why rigorous, systematic research would be infeasible”

Comment:

However, it is not possible to experimentally reproduce bitemark circumstances such as violent altercations
Spectrum of Bitemarks

In human skin
Witnessed bite through clothing

No evidentiary value in bitemark analysis
Healed bitemark

No evidentiary value in bitemark analysis
Badly distorted bitemark in fatty skin

No evidentiary value in bitemark analysis
Diffuse bitemark

No evidentiary value in bitemark analysis
Bitemark with individual and class characteristics

Higher evidentiary value that could be useful in bitemark analysis
Child versus Adult bitemark

Child on child biting
Child on Child Biting
Teeth position at start of biting

Teeth position at conclusion of biting
The NAS Report - Bitemark Analysis - Daubert Expert Presentation

January 12, 2011
Definition of *Science*

- **World English Dictionary** definition:
  - …the knowledge so obtained or the practice of obtaining it; any body of knowledge organized in a systematic manner; skill or technique

- **Science Dictionary** definition:
  - …the investigation of natural phenomena through observation, theoretical explanation, and experimentation, or the knowledge produced by such investigation
Definition of Science

“…the concerted human effort to understand, or better understand…how the natural world works…It is done through observation of natural phenomena, and/or through experimentation that tries to simulate natural processes under controlled conditions (emphasis added)

Source: www.gly.uga.edu
Perhaps better said:

- “Science is the belief in the ignorance of experts”  
  - Richard Feynman, Nobel Prize winning physicist 1999

- “A true scientist is bored by knowledge; it is the assault on ignorance that motivates him”  
  - Matt Ridley, Genome - the autobiography of a species in 23 chapters, pg. 271
“(Scientists) may have a high level of confidence if there’s abundant evidence, but they won’t ever claim absolute Truth or absolute certainty”

Source: www.gly.uga.edu
Bitemark Analysis as Science

Based on the definitions of science, bitemark analysis fits well, with one notable exception:

- **Experimental testing:**
  - it is not possible to experimentally create and recreate bitemarks in unanaesthetized living human skin for research purposes.
Daubert and Bitemark Analysis

NAS Report regarding Bitemark Analysis
2009
“Daubert Trilogy” vs. Daubert: Federal Rules of Evidence 702

- Removing the concerns some have regarding bitemark analysis as pure “science”, indulge the use of the “Daubert Trilogy”, which includes *Daubert v Merrill Dow Pharmaceuticals; Kuhmo Tire Co v Carmichael and GE v Joiner*

- *Will better focus the discussion on bitemark analysis and expert testimony*
Daubert Trilogy

- Applies to scientific, technical or other specialized knowledge regarding expert witness testimony
Relevant Factors of *Daubert*

- Evidence based on a testable theory
- Subjected to peer review and publication
- Known or potential error rate
- Standards and controls concerning its operation
- Is the underlying science generally accepted by a relevant scientific community
Relevant Factors of Daubert

- skin recording bitemarks
- uniqueness of the dentition

From the NAS report
Evidence based on a testable theory

Ability of human skin to accurately record bitemark

- Research on the reaction of skin to biting using human cadaver skin and living porcine skin
  
  *(not living human skin)*
Research Centers

McGill University, Montreal

University at Buffalo, The State University of New York

Research using cadaver skin

Research using anesthetized porcine skin
Peer Reviewed research - Skin

***Mary A. Bush,1 D.D.S.; Raymond G. Miller,1 D.D.S.; Peter J. Bush,1 B.S.; and Robert B. J. Dorion,2 D.D.S.

Biomechanical Factors in Human Dermal Bitemarks in a Cadaver Model*

J Forensic Sci, January 2009, Vol. 54, No. 1
Available online at: www.blackwell-synergy.com

***Mary A. Bush,1 D.D.S.; Howard I. Cooper,2 D.D.S.; and Robert B. J. Dorion,3 D.D.S.

Inquiry into the Scientific Basis for Bitemark Profiling and Arbitrary Distortion Compensation

J Forensic Sci, July 2010, Vol. 55, No. 4
doi: 10.1111/j.1556-4029.2010.01394.x
Available online at: interscience.wiley.com

***Sylvain Desranleau,1 D.M.D. and Robert B. J. Dorion,2 D.D.S.

Bite Marks: Physical Properties of Ring Adhesion to Skin—Phase 1*

J Forensic Sci, 2010
doi: 10.1111/j.1556-4029.2010.01604.x
Available online at: onlinelibrary.wiley.com

Uniqueness of the Dentition as Impressed in Human Skin: A Cadaver Model*
J Forensic Sci, July 2009, Vol. 54, No. 4
doi: 10.1111/j.1556-4029.2009.01076.x
Available online at: www.blackwell-synergy.com


The Response of Skin to Applied Stress: Investigation of Bitemark Distortion in a Cadaver Model*
J Forensic Sci, January 2010, Vol. 55, No. 1
doi: 10.1111/j.1556-4029.2009.01235.x
Available online at: interscience.wiley.com

Mathematical matching of a dentition to bitemarks: Use and evaluation of affine methods
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“Unfortunately, bite marks on the skin will change over time and can be distorted by the elasticity of the skin, the unevenness of the surface bite, and swelling and healing. These features may severely limit the validity of forensic odontology. Also, some practical difficulties, such as distortions in photographs and changes over time in the dentition of suspects, may limit the accuracy of the results.” (5-35)
“The ability of the dentition, if unique, to transfer a unique pattern to human skin and the ability of the skin to maintain that uniqueness has not been scientifically established.129

i. The ability to analyze and interpret the scope or extent of distortion of bitemark patterns on human skin has not been demonstrated.

ii. The effect of distortion on different comparison techniques is not fully understood and therefore has not been quantified.”
If the bitemark in skin possesses both distinct individual and class characteristics (high quality bitemark) AND if the population of suspected biters is small (say n=2 or 3) AND if each suspected biter has a dentition that is visibly and notably different for each other, it would be possible to establish biter identity.
Comments:

- Research of biting in living human skin is impractical for medical, legal and ethical considerations at this time.
- Identification of the biter should be restricted to only those cases that meet the criteria as previously noted—bitemarks with distinct individual and class characteristics, small/closed population of suspected biters, each of whom has distinctly different dentitions.
NAS Report: regarding bitemarks and bitemark analysis in skin

- “…it is reasonable to assume that the process can sometimes reliably exclude suspects.” (5-37)

- “The ability of the dentition, if unique, to transfer a unique pattern to human skin…has not be scientifically established” (5-37)
Conflict

- If skin doesn’t accurately record tooth position in bitemarks, then neither biter inclusion nor exclusion should be possible. (That’s not what the NAS report says.)

Comment:

There are high quality bitemarks that they can be reliably used in bitemark analysis for inclusion or exclusion.
Comment (continued)

In an open population of suspected biters, bitemark analysis opinions should not be rendered.
Evidence Based on a Testable Theory

- Uniqueness of the human dentition

- Research on the arrangement, shape and position of the six upper and lower anterior teeth in two- and three- dimensions
Arrangement of the Anterior Human Teeth

- The 2D and 3D databases are being compiled to examine the positions of each of the anterior human teeth individually and collectively.
- It is hoped that they will one day be searchable to create a “dental lineup” of suspected biters’ dentition to use in bitemark analysis.

The Uniqueness of the Human Anterior Dentition: A Geometric Morphometric Analysis

doi:10.1111/j.1556-4029.2007.00403.x
Available online at: www.blackwell-synergy.com

Similarity and match rates of the human dentition in three dimensions: relevance to bitemark analysis

Mary A. Bush · Peter J. Bush · H. David Sheets

Forensic Science International journal   www.elsevier.com/locate/forsciint:

Uniqueness in the forensic identification sciences—Fact or fiction?
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Contents
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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Comments:

Using high quality bitemarks with a small/closed population of suspected biters who have dentitions are notably dissimilar, the uniqueness of the human dentition in large population-based studies is irrelevant.
The databases being constructed mapping the anterior dentitions of human teeth in 2D and 3D will be a significant aid in creating a dental lineup of similar dentitions, increasing the accuracy, validity and reliability of the bitemark analysis.

In cases where only one potential biter is identified by investigators, creating a dental lineup will prove invaluable.
Relevant Factors of *Daubert*

- Evidence based on a testable theory
- Subjected to peer review and publication
- Known or potential error rate
- Are there standards and controls concerning its operation
- Is the underlying science generally accepted by a relevant scientific community
Relevant Factors of *Daubert*

- Known or potential error rate
Known or potential error rate

Comments:

- False positive or false negative errors should be near zero with high quality bitemarks and closed population of biters who have different dentitions.

- Working with an open population and less than ideal bitemark evidence will lead to an undeterminable error rate.
Known or potential error rate

- Operator bias
  - Blinded case review ("second opinion")

- Failure to follow prescribed methodology
  - Independent of operator bias
Relevant Factors of *Daubert*

- Maintaining Standards and Controls
Maintaining Standards and Controls:

- ABFO Guidelines and Standards on Bitemark Analysis, Bitemark Terminology and Bitemark Report Writing
- ABFO Recertification Examination
- ABFO Peer Review (motion pending)
- ABFO Bitemark Proficiency testing (in development)
- ABFO Bitemark subspecialty designation??
Relevant Factors of Daubert

- Is the underlying science generally accepted by a relevant scientific community
General acceptance by a relevant scientific community

Comments:

- Expert testimony in bitemark analysis has been accepted by the courts for decades

- In *Forensic Dentistry, 2nd edition*, edited by Senn and Stimson, pages 411-421 list some 250 cited federal and state appeals decisions upholding bitemark analysis
“The research suggests that bitemark evidence, at least that which is used to identify biters, is a potentially valid and reliable methodology. It is generally accepted within the scientific community…”

Iain Pretty in *Bitemark Evidence*, 1st edition, edited by Dorion, pg 543
Prominent chapters in the 2nd Edition involving Daubert and bitemark analysis:

- Chapters 20, 21, 22, 23, 29 and 34
Chapter 14: Bitemarks

Appendix: US Federal and State Court Cases of Interest in Forensic Odontology
Bitemark Analysis Comments

- There is a place in forensic science for bitemark analysis

- The best use of bitemark analysis is adjunctive evidence in any given case
Comments on the NAS report

- Bitemarks and DNA
  - It would be most beneficial if DNA could be recovered from human bitemarks and added to the list of possible evidence to use in a case.
  - Great care must be exercised to be certain that source of the DNA and its interaction with the bitemark is well established.
Comments on the NAS report

- Some of the citations used in the NAS report appear to have based on the 1999 ABFO Bitemark Workshop #4 being represented as a “proficiency test”. It was not. A Position Paper on the intention of ABFO Bitemark Workshop #4 was published in 2003 by the ABFO clearing stating the workshop was not a proficiency test, thus no conclusions regarding proficiency could be gleaned.
I wish to acknowledge Drs. David Senn, Robert BJ Dorion, Roger Metcalf and Robert Barsley for their help with this presentation.