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## Sci/Tech

### Police play it by ear



Ear prints can be used like fingerprints to convict criminals

Police are compiling what is believed to be the world's largest computer database of ear prints to be used in the same way as fingerprint evidence in linking suspects to crimes.

The database is the brainchild of the same organisation that last month successfully brought the first prosecution of a criminal on the basis of an ear print.

Mark Dallagher was convicted of murdering an elderly woman in Huddersfield after the prosecution showed that ear prints on a newly washed window could only have been left by him as he listened for signs of movement inside the house.

And another case, expected to come to court early in the New Year, could add further weight to the forensic uses of the technique.



Dallagher was convicted on the strength of his ear print

The National Training Centre for Scientific Support to Crime Investigation has so far collected more than 1,200 ear images in its database at Harpeley Hall, County Durham, and researchers hope to take that figure up to 2,000.

The aim is to build a comprehensive research tool to back up evidence that no two ears are exactly the same. The database

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has been built up using volunteers from among trainees at the centre and includes samples from identical twins which are still different enough to be identifiable.

Since research started more than two years ago, police have detected about 100 ear prints at crime scenes.

These cases have been passed on to John Kennerley, Chief Fingerprint Officer with Lancashire police and the detective pioneering the new technique.

### **Vital breakthrough**

He believes police only detect ear prints in a fraction of cases where they are left, mainly because officers scouring the scene of a crime, unaware of their value, are simply not searching for them.

Mr Kennerley estimates there could be several hundred cases each year where detection of prints could prove to be a vital breakthrough - although this would not be enough to make it worthwhile compiling a national database of offenders' ears.

The project has had input from the acknowledged world expert on ear prints, Cornelis Van Der Lugt of the Netherlands, who has been studying the subject for 12 years.

Alongside the work in the Netherlands, the UK scheme is leading the world in developing the technique which is winning support elsewhere in Europe and America.

### **Forensic toolbox**

Mr Kennerley said: "It's never going to be like fingerprints or DNA, but it's another tool in the forensic toolbox.

"No two things in nature are alike, but we need the investigative skills to analyse the data.

"Essentially they're like fingerprints. Although they don't have the ridges, the cartilage and contours of every ear give it a unique shape."

Mr Kennerley admitted suspects were sometimes surprised when asked to provide an ear print - taken by the suspect leaning against a window or door to replicate the sample taken from the crime scene.

But if the search for ear prints becomes as routine as Mr Kennerley would like, it could mean that burglars who already don gloves before ransacking someone else's property will be adding ear muffs to their list of essential kit.

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