Crime scenes can be found in any place, such as a veld (for example, when a body is dumped in the veld, or in a rhino poaching or a stock theft case), a building (ranging from shopping malls to private homes) and a road. It is of vital importance that any person who arrives at a crime scene first, knows what to do. No matter where the crime scene is, even community members should familiarise themselves with the proper procedure for securing a crime scene in order to ensure proper identification, preservation and collection of evidence that could help to solve the crime. Investigating officers and crime scene investigators only have one chance to collect proper evidence at a crime scene, and this job is regularly thwarted by the destruction of a crime scene due to the negligence and ignorance of community members, emergency services personnel, private security officers, young and inexperienced police members, and sometimes even higher-ranking police officers who want access to the scene.

In the early morning hours of a clear summer’s day, a group of grass cutters stumble across the semi-naked body of a woman in the long grass. Not far from the body, they notice a bloodied knife and a rock covered with hair and blood. The reaction, and the steps taken by these grass cutters in the minutes after their discovery, to secure the crime scene until the police arrive, are vital to ensure that the suspects are eventually arrested, convicted and sentenced.

While waiting for the police, it is important to remember the following:

- Do not smoke, eat or drink anything in or near the crime scene as it can contaminate other physical evidence.
- Do not use the bathroom at a crime scene as crime scene investigators can collect toilet paper, faecal material, condoms and swabs from toilets which can provide useful physical evidence in certain cases.
- Do not prematurely handle any evidence at the scene. Wait for the crime scene investigators.
- Do not replace evidence if it has been moved. For example, if medical personnel had to move a table, don’t move the table back into position. Simply tell the police member that the table was moved why it was moved, and leave it in that position.
- If possible, do not use the phones found on the crime scene to call the police.
- Do not use the trash cans on the crime scene, as they often hold physical evidence.
- Tracks or shoe-prints found at the crime scene, which could be relevant to the case at hand, have to be protected from rain, wind, animals and people. On distant farms or in rural areas, where it can take a while for the police to arrive, evidence such as tracks can be protected by, for example, placing a drum that has been cut open over the track or print.
Do not try to follow tracks. Wait for the police to do it.
Do not try to repair locks, windows or fences, which were damaged during the commission of the crime, prior to the police completing their investigation.
Do not touch or move any evidence such as clothing, cigarette butts, bottles or broken vehicle lights, as they can provide valuable evidence to the investigation. The first three types of evidence can contain DNA, while broken vehicle lights can, for example, be taken to the SAPS’s Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL), where the analysts can do physical matching once suspects are arrested and once more pieces of evidence, such as vehicles, are found in the possession of criminals.
Where livestock have been stolen out of a kraal, the remaining livestock must remain in the kraal until members of the Stock Theft Unit arrive, since important evidence, such as tracks and marks, can be destroyed as soon as the animals leave the kraal.

First responders
First responders have an immense responsibility. They have to assess the situation quickly, as the victim may still be alive or the attacker can still be in the vicinity. There is also the possibility of dangerous substances being present, such as gas leaks and poisonous chemicals that can be found in clandestine drug laboratories, at arson scenes or after an explosion. While facing the threat of personal harm and saving the life of others, police members almost need to walk through the scene as if walking on eggs. It is important that police members, or any other emergency personnel who arrive at the scene first, secure the scene and establish a perimeter. It is important to consider establishing a route into and out of the scene for all the people working on the crime scene, be they paramedics, police members or firefighters. A quick search of the area must be conducted to ensure that no physical evidence will be disturbed before a path is marked out where responders can walk. Remember to establish one point of entry and exit into and out of the scene to minimise contamination. No one who is not a key person in the investigation must be allowed to enter the crime scene. Family members have a tendency to get in the way, as they feel the need to be a part of the picture and want answers. First responders must keep them out of the crime scene, as they can also destroy evidence in their attempt to see what is going on.
Nobody must leave the area until they have been interviewed, as everybody at the scene could be a possible witness. The first responder must not assume that a cooperative witness is innocent, as s/he could very well be the culprit, or an accomplice.

These days, almost everyone has a camera/video recorder available on their cellphone, and curious people sometimes take photos and videos which they then publish on social media sites. If at all possible, do not allow people close enough to the scene to take photos that could jeopardise the investigation.

The most critical evidence at any violent crime scene is likely to be the victim. In 1997, a woman from Colorado called 911 to report screams in the alley behind her home. A police member reacted and when he arrived at the scene, a severely beaten 21-year-old woman was found. Within minutes, other police members and medical personnel arrived at the scene. While the emergency personnel attended to the victim, the first police member on the scene had the presence of mind to grab a camera and start snapping pictures. The victim subsequently died of her injuries and the photographs taken in the alley by the police member were the only pictures that showed the original state of the victim. The fact that her sweatshirt hood was on and that her pants were twisted to one side became important details in the case that would have been lost if the photographs did not exist.

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No matter where the crime scene is, even community members should familiarise themselves with the proper procedure for securing a crime scene in order to ensure proper identification, preservation and collection of evidence that could help to solve the crime.

Preserving a crime scene is important and the scene must be protected from the very beginning. Only then are the crime scene investigators able to collect all the evidence that can play a vital role in solving the case. What some people do not regard as important can be a breakthrough in a difficult case. In the Leigh Matthews case, for instance, a funnel web spider which had spun its web between Leigh’s thighs, as well as the lack of fly eggs and maggots on her body, helped the forensics team to ascertain that the area in which her body was found was not the murder scene. Her murderer, however, claimed that it was the murder scene, and denied that she was kept in a fridge. This was just one of the many cases where forensics played a vital role by giving a "voice" to the victim. In his argument during the Leigh Matthews case, State prosecutor Adv Zaais van Zyl said that "vital clues as to the darkness after her violent death on 9 July 2004 until the discovery of her body on 21 July 2004 at about 14:00, are all supplied by Leigh Matthews herself". This observation followed his opening statement, in which he quoted D H Lawrence: "The dead do not die; they look on and help." Leigh’s murderer, Donavan Moodley, was eventually sentenced to life incarceration.
The protection and preservation of a crime scene is extremely important in helping the police to get to evidence that can lead to similar prosecutions of those criminals who think they outsmart the police.

Editor’s note
The list of references is published on p 73.