DNA phenotyping revolutionizing forensics

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On the morning of November 23, 2009, a cyclist riding near Lake Charles, Louisiana, discovered the body of a young woman lying near a country road. Under her fingernails were DNA samples of her supposed killer. However, the police suddenly met a dead end when the sample DNA didn't match with any of their suspects.

Then, in June 2015, a DNA analyst decided to use a different method. Called DNA phenotyping, the technique conjures up a physical likeness of the person who left the sample behind, including traits such as geographic ancestry, eye and natural hair color, and even a possible shape for facial features.

DNA phenotyping is a relatively recent arrival in forensic science, and some critics question how useful it will be. The facial composites it produces are predictions from genetics, not photographs. Human genome pioneer Craig Venter, as part of his new personalized health company called Human Longevity, is also investigating facial reconstruction from DNA, as are many academic labs.

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