

Still a big freeze - Delay of justice in DNA - Courier Mail, The/Sunday Mail, The/QWeekend Magazine (Brisbane, Australia) - September 2, 2007 - page 042

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ALMOST 9000 DNA samples remain in freezers at the state's main forensic lab despite repeated government assurances the backlog would be cleared by the end of this year.

The latest Department of Health figures show there are 8894 DNA cases still awaiting testing at Brisbane's John Tonge Centre -- down from 11,920 in August last year.

Problems at the centre were highlighted in 2005 when a backlog of 23,000 samples caused delays of more than two years for some court cases waiting on test results.

The State Government promised an extra \$8.7 million in funding to address the problems and Health Minister Stephen Robertson vowed the backlogs would be cleared by the end of this year.

Queensland Health insists the minister's pledge still stands and that the remaining 8894 cases will be cleared by New Year.

"QHSS is on track to clear the backlog of DNA cases by the end of the year," said an official from the department. He said demand for testing exhibits had increased 15 per cent in the past year and the centre was now processing around 1200 DNA samples monthly.

Cathie Allen, acting managing scientist of forensic biology at the centre, has backed the department's claims, saying she is "100 per cent" certain they will hit their targets.

"We are proud of what we do here and we will have reached our targets by the end of this year," she told The Sunday Mail.

The centre bought \$500,000 worth of robotic equipment last year to speed up test times.

But the long induction process for the machines means only one of the four robotic platforms is in use.

Ms Allen said two more of the platforms were expected to come on-line next month.

"We are confident that we now have the equipment and the staff to achieve our targets," she said.

The Queensland Health official said the QHSS was now meeting all court dates in relation to DNA exhibits. He also said that testing on all current case exhibits was now being started within four weeks of the DNA being received by the centre.

"Testing of exhibits is prioritised in consultation with the Queensland Police Service and DNA testing is scheduled on this basis," the official said.

The centre was promised an additional \$7 million investment in the last State Budget.

This would be used to recruit staff, buy new equipment and refurbish the DNA testing lab.

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