Doctors specializing in skin and scars could be valuable resources for police sketch artists

October 18 2012, by Erin White

(Phys.org)—Dermatologists and forensic sketch artists share an obsession with skin that could make them ideal partners in crime investigations, according to a published essay by a well-known forensic art instructor at the Northwestern University Center for Public Safety.

"Knowing how someone may have gotten a scar, for example, is a clue investigators could use," explained Northwestern forensic art instructor Lois Gibson.

In the essay published in the journal *Clinics in Dermatology*, Gibson outlines cases she's worked on that involved unknown suspects or victims with unusual scars. In one case, a witness' detailed description of a dime-sized keloid scar on an armed-robbery suspect's forehead helped investigators track down the suspect, gain a confession and solve a case.

No one knows more about scars, lesions and skin abnormalities than a dermatologist, and that expertise could play an important role in homicide and armed robbery investigations as well as John or Jane Doe cases (when a victim is unidentified), Gibson stressed in the article.

Based in Houston, Gibson has assisted law enforcement for 30 years, and her sketches have helped identify more than 1,200 perpetrators. She has taught at the Northwestern University Center for Public Safety for more than a decade.

"When I'm creating a sketch from the memory of a witness or from the

remains of a body, skin is an important feature," Gibson said. "It is the largest part of the body. If there is a scar or an abnormality on the skin of the person I'm drawing, a dermatologist could look at my sketch and help determine if a scar is from a burn or the result of a surgical procedure or perhaps a bad car accident.'"

That sort of insight about a person's past injuries, medical procedures or skin conditions could provide critical clues for investigators who are trying to identify an unknown murder victim or track down an at-large suspect, Gibson said.

"Police get a lot of calls from the public after a sketch is released to the media, and it can be difficult to know if a caller has valid information that could lead to the identification of a   suspect," Gibson said. "Knowing how someone may have gotten a scar is a clue investigators could use. If a dermatologist gives a few different possible causes, law enforcement could screen callers by asking specific questions about a suspect's scars or skin condition."

In the essay, she also detailed an unsolved John Doe homicide case in which the victim was found murdered in a ditch with no identification. The victim had a large, obvious scar running across his forehead and into his hairline. "A seasoned dermatologist might be able to give investigators important information about the cause of the particular appearance of this wound," she said.

Gibson has worked with anthropologists to reconstruct and sketch faces from skeletal remains and spent time in dental schools to better understand and draw tooth anomalies. She said working with dermatologists is an obvious next partnership that artists in the relatively new profession of forensic art should embrace.

"If dermatologists see a sketch of an unidentified suspect or victim on

TV and notice an unusual scar or skin condition, they should reach out to the artist or detective working on the case and offer their expertise about the possible origin of the skin abnormality," Gibson said. "You never know what detail might solve a crime."

Provided by Northwestern University