A response to EA-4/23 INF:2025 “The Assessment and Accreditation of Opinions and Interpretations using ISO/IEC 17025:2017”

Keywords

EA-4/23; Forensic science; Interpretation; Opinion; ISO/IEC 17025; ISO 21043

Letter to the Editor

We are concerned that EA-4/23 INF:2025 *The Assessment and Accreditation of Opinions and Interpretations using ISO/IEC 17025:2017* provides inappropriate guidance on how to conduct forensic interpretation and on how to report forensic opinions. Following this guidance would result in misleading statements being provided to legal decision makers, which would potentially have adverse consequences.

EA-4/23 INF is a document published by the European co-operation for Accreditation (EA). The second revision was published 2025-04-30, and it is available from https://european-accreditation.org/publications/ea-4-23-inf/.

The stated aim of EA-4/23 INF:2025 is as follows:

> “The aim of [EA-4/23 INF:2025] is to promote harmonization between National Accreditation Bodies (NABs) on how opinions and interpretations should be assessed and how the accreditation of opinions and interpretations may be expressed and communicated to potential customers.” (p 1)
>
> “The aim is to promote a harmonised approach across Europe, not only in the reporting of opinions and interpretations, but also for the level of assessment to

> ensure that opinions and interpretations cannot be misunderstood by the customers of a laboratory offering this service under accreditation." (p 4)

The phrase "opinions and interpretations" is used in ISO/IEC 17025 *General requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories* but is not defined therein. EA-4/23 INF:2025 defines "opinions and interpretations" as follows:

> "Opinions and interpretations are the outcome of a process where one or more results of a test or calibration activity are extended beyond the scope of the result or the item under investigation. It is formulated by a technically qualified person / organisation and further inferences are made based on the result produced, using knowledge and professional judgement of the person / organisation in the activity being undertaken. Opinions and Interpretations may not include numerical use of the uncertainty of the measurements, any decision rule or numerical level of risk[,] but understanding and considering uncertainty of results used must be assured as appropriate.[1] They may be based on past experience of the technically qualified person, similarity of results or any other technically sound and supported evidence deemed necessary. For the purpose of ISO/IEC 17025:2017 application, opinions and interpretations are considered to be synonyms." (pp 5–6)

This definition differs from the definitions of "interpretation" and "opinion" in ISO 21043-1:2025 *Forensic sciences – Part 1: Vocabulary*, in which "interpretation" is a process and "opinion" is the output of that process. The ISO 20143-1:2025 definition of "interpretation" is:

> "part of the *examination* that uses professional judgement, logic, expertise, and

[1] The ISO convention is that the auxiliary verb "may" indicates permission. We therefore understand this sentence to state a permission to not "include numerical use of the uncertainty of the measurements, [or] any decision rule or numerical level of risk", rather than a requirement not to do so. A requirement not to do so would be stated using "shall not".

> relevant data and information and, if applicable, statistical models to infer the meaning of *observations* so as to provide *opinions* with respect to questions asked" (emphasis in original)

The use of "finding" in EA-4/23 INF:2025 appears to parallel the ISO 20143-1:2025 term "observation", which is the output of analysis of items and the input to interpretation.

In the remainder of the present letter to the editor, we restrict ourselves to comments regarding EA-4/23 INF:2025 content that EA-4/23 INF:2025 itself explicitly relates to forensic science. We do not comment on application of EA-4/23 INF:2025 to fields other than forensic science.

Although ISO/IEC 17025:2017 is widely used to accredit forensic service providers' activities, particularly their laboratory-based activities, it is not specific to forensic science and, in fact, makes no mention of forensic science.[2] In contrast, EA-4/23 INF:2025 includes two examples that explicitly provide guidance related to forensic science:

> "**1. Forensic Testing:**
>
> A forensic laboratory analyses a garment worn by a victim with a cut through the fabric and a knife found at the scene of the crime. The laboratory reports the findings of the analysis and gives an opinions and interpretations [*sic*][3] that the knife found at the scene of the crime *could have* caused the cut in the jumper: *this is a valid use of opinions and interpretations* as the opinion and interpretation

[2] Guidance on implementing ISO/IEC 17025 for forensic activities is provided in ILAC G19 *Modules in a Forensic Science Process*.

[3] We use "[*sic*]" to indicate typographical, spelling, and grammatical errors (including punctuation errors) in quoted material. Where the error might not be obvious, we use "[*recte* …]" to indicate what would be correct.

given only relates to the items tested.

e.g [*sic*] the cut pattern in the jumper was *consistent with* the knife blade, there could well be other factors involved, for example the angle of attack etc. and this would be established by somebody with in-depth knowledge of this type of incident using data to make a professional judgment [*recte* judgement]."[4] (p 10, emphasis added)

"**8. Forensic example based on several samples and methods:**

A pedestrian was hit by a motor vehicle in a hit and run incident. Paint particles were obtained from the clothing of the victim, the site of the accident and from vehicles seen in the vicinity at the time in question.

Microscopic examinations and FTIR spectroscopy were used to compare the *colour* shades of paint particles found at [*sic*] the clothing of the victim with paint particles obtained from the different cars to ascertain *if there was a contact between the victim and the cars*. In addition, elemental analysis and RAMAN spectroscopy were used to compare the *elemental composition* of metallic-coloured paint particles.

Results showed that silver metallic-coloured paint particles obtained from two cars could be distinguished and that silver metallic-coloured paint particles from the jacket of the victim matched paint particles obtained from one of the cars.

In addition[,] all micro trace particles of a different colour (blue, red, yellow) found in [*sic*] the clothing did not match any of the paintwork of the comparison vehicles under discussion and did not match the paint chips found on the road at the site oft he [*sic*] accident.

[4] EA-4/23 INF:2025 uses UK spelling conventions. In UK spelling, a "judgment" is a legal ruling.

> The laboratory reported the results and provided the following opinions and interpretations:
>
> Based on the material-analytical findings[,] there is an *indication* that metallic silver paint from the easily chipped wheel cover of one specific car in the event of a [*sic*] *possible contact* was transferred to the jacket of the victim. Silver metallic paintwork with aluminium flakes are [*sic*] not individual paintwork, but there is a wide range of variations due to different possible colour shades, different pigments and different binding agents.
>
> However, the nuanced differentiation of different colour shades is only possible to a limited extent, as the surface size of the silver-metallic trace particles on the jacket were extremely small.
>
> In the case of the other vehicles mentioned, *contact with the pedestrian cannot be ruled out* either, as the impact may have been [*sic*] occurred slowly, so that little or no car paint was transferred.
>
> *Nor can it be ruled out* that an unknown vehicle was passing by at the time of the accident and had *contact with the pedestrian*." (pp 12–13, emphasis added)

EA-4/23 INF:2025 states that these are "*acceptable* ... examples of the use of opinions and interpretations" (p 10, emphasis added). It also states that "The examples are guidance and there may well be other factors that need to be considered to ensure that the opinions and interpretations are valid" (p 6).

We do not comment on the technical interpretation process (e.g., solely via professional judgement and experience, or via relevant data, quantitative measurements, and statistical models) by which an opinion could be reached. We comment on the logic necessary for forming and expressing opinions.

In Example 1, stating that the knife found at the crime scene "could have" caused the

cut in the garment, or that the cut pattern is “consistent with” the blade of the knife found at the crime scene, is meaningless and is misleading. These expressions are meaningless because they do not preclude that some other sharp object “could have” caused the cut, or that the cut pattern is “consistent with” some other sharp object. The knife found at the crime scene “could have” caused the cut, but so “could have” some other sharp object. They are misleading because, by not mentioning any alternative to the knife found at the crime scene, they imply that the cut was not caused by some other sharp object.

“Could have” and “consistent with” express possibility only. Neither expression states anything about how probable the observed properties of the cut would be if they had been caused by the knife found at the crime scene. Something could be possible, but highly improbable. Nor do these expressions state anything about how probable the observed properties of the cut would be if they had been caused by some other sharp object. The observed properties of the cut could be more likely to occur if they were caused by some other sharp object than if they were caused by the knife found at the crime scene.

Logically, as outlined in guidance provided by the European Network of Forensic Science Institutes [1], the forensic practitioner must assess the probability of obtaining the observations if one hypothesis were true relative to the probability of obtaining the observations if an alternative hypothesis were true. The two hypotheses must be mutually exclusive, and each hypothesis must be specific. Each hypothesis would have to make sense in the context of the case, and, depending on the context of the case, more than one alternative hypothesis could be considered.

Example 8 includes: “there is an indication ... of possible contact” between one specific vehicle and the pedestrian’s jacket, “contact [of other specific vehicles] with the pedestrian cannot be ruled out”, and “Nor can it be ruled out that an unknown vehicle ... had contact with the pedestrian”. These expressions are meaningless and misleading.

They are meaningless because they say nothing about the relative probabilities of obtaining the observations if the first hypothesis were true versus if one of the other hypotheses were true.

The expressions are misleading because, based only on observations about colour and elemental composition of the paint particles, they express opinions about which vehicle "contacted" the pedestrian, and by implication which vehicle hit the pedestrian; however, logically, although the observed colour and elemental composition of the paint particles could inform opinions about which vehicle the paint particles came from, these observations alone would be insufficient to inform opinions about the process by which the paint particles came to be on the pedestrian's clothing. Even if it were not contested that the paint particles on the pedestrian's clothing came from a particular vehicle, this would not necessarily mean that that vehicle hit the pedestrian.

Neither of the EA-4/23 INF:2025 forensic-science examples are logically correct. The opinions presented are meaningless and misleading. They are, therefore, neither "valid" nor "acceptable". Because of this, we recommend that forensic practitioners, forensic service providers, and national accreditation bodies not use the EA-4/23 INF:2025 examples as sources of guidance with respect to how to conduct forensic interpretation and how to report forensic opinions. Instead, we recommend they use ISO 21043-4:2025 *Forensic sciences – Part 4: Interpretation* and ISO 21043-5:2025 *Forensic sciences – Part 5: Reporting*, which were published 2025-06-05.

Disclaimer

All opinions expressed herein are those of the signatories, and, unless explicitly stated otherwise, should not be construed as representing the policies or positions of any organizations with which the signatories are associated.

Declaration of competing interest

The signatories declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Note on authorship

The original draft of this letter to the editor was written by the first-listed signatory. The first-six-listed signatories contributed to revised drafts leading to the final version. The remaining signatories were then invited to add their support. Signatories are listed in the order in which they provided their names and affiliations.

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1 Letter to the Editor

Morrison et al. [1] commented on EA-4/23 INF:2025 *The Assessment and Accreditation of Opinions and Interpretations using ISO/IEC 17025:2017*, and raised concerns that it provided inappropriate guidance on how to conduct forensic interpretation and on how to report forensic opinions.

Following publication of Morrison et al. [1], the first six signatories of that letter to the editor met with representatives of the European co-operation for Accreditation (EA). The EA representatives clarified that EA-4/23 INF is an informational document, and is not intended to promulgate any requirements or recommendations. As an outcome of the meeting, EA has revised EA-4/23 INF. The revised version was published 2026-01-26. In the revised version, the two forensic-science-specific examples have been deleted, and the following text has been inserted in §1 Introduction:

> "This document is intended to provide guidance on the expression of opinions and interpretations in fields where no sector-specific standards or normative documents are available. In cases where sector-specific standards or normative documents exist, those should be used as the primary reference.
>
> For guidance on opinions and interpretations in forensic science activities see: ISO 21043-4 Forensic sciences – Part 4: Interpretation and ISO 21043-5 Forensic sciences – Part 5: Reporting."

We thank the EA and its representatives for their cooperation and prompt action leading to a favourable resolution of this matter.

2 Reference

[1] Morrison G.S., Biedermann A., Tart M., Meuwly D., Berger C.E.H., Guiness J., Houck M.M., Gibb C., Dawid A.P., Kotsoglou K.N., Kaye D.H., Rose P., Taroni F., Kokshoorn B., Saks M.J., Buckleton J.S., Curran J.M., Taylor D., Zhang C., Vuille J., Champod C., Simonsen B.T., Mattei A., Lucena-Molina J.J., Zabell S., Chin J.M., Gallidabino M., Wevers G., Moreton R., Eldridge H., Martire K.A., Aitken C.G.G., Cole S.A., González-Rodríguez J., Smithuis M., Edvardsen T., Wilson-Wilde L., Zadora G., Gittelson S., Jackson G., Sjerps M.J., Brard F., Hicks T., Kennedy J., Latten B.G.H., Weber P., Willis S., Ramos D., Koehler J.J., Ribeiro R.O., Crispino F., Basu N., Meakin G.E., Kirkbride K.P., Tully G., Jessen M., Syndercombe Court D. (2025). A response to EA-4/23 INF:2025 “The Assessment and Accreditation of Opinions and Interpretations using ISO/IEC 17025:2017”. *Forensic Science International*, 376, 112589. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forsciint.2025.112589