

# Three cheers for quiet achievers

Property and exhibits registrars perform a vital role in supporting investigations and investigators.

For most who deal with the AFP's property and exhibits registrars, it's that front counter where seized evidence is checked in or checked out when needed. But behind the roller door, registrars manage the complex evidence of every investigation across Australia. It's a vital role – in fact a cornerstone in the trail of getting criminals to trial.

The AFP's 90 Registrars operate under state managers in each capital city and in Cairns. Fulltime Registrars are located in Canberra (the ACT Police Exhibit Management Centre and AFP National headquarters), Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. Dual position-responsibilities are located in Hobart, Adelaide, Perth, Darwin and Cairns.

Perhaps because it is such a well-oiled system, AFP members would largely be unaware of the warehouse environment and the full duties Registrars undertake behind the scenes. Registrars have an important role in ensuring the AFP meets its legislative requirements to maintain evidence. Importantly, this enables investigators to focus on investigations.

One of the most visible jobs of registrars at the moment is the management and destruction of the AFP's massive holdings of seized drugs and property. This is no small task. Warehousing facilities are operating at capacity in Melbourne and Sydney.

Project Kemble was established in 2015 to look at options for quicker disposal and ensure a national consistent approach is applied to property and exhibits. While registries have the authority to identify holdings for destruction, they are unable to destroy holdings until case officers provide the destruction notification request. Collaboration between state

managers and the registries under Project Kemble is yielding positive results.

Acting Coordinator Project Kemble Michael Field says this back-of-house function is an important part of the support provided to investigators and investigations. "People don't necessarily know what is happening behind the scenes," he says. "Registrars do more than just provide that customer service."

Along with the seized contraband, 'drug wraps' also are kept. This could be anything from a suitcase to the steam roller seized during Operation Pendine (Sydney Office) in 2012 with 350 kilograms of cocaine and methamphetamine. There are some holdings that date back to the late 1990s. All these items eventually need to be destroyed or, in some cases, auctioned as appropriate.

"We are running out of space very quickly," Michael says. "Over the last four years in Sydney, seizures have doubled and we are predicting that over the next four years they will double again. Sydney is seizing more and more and that is adding to the current holdings. Despite their best efforts, Sydney Registrars cannot destroy enough to keep up with the rate of seizures taking place."

A trial last year by Sydney registry is showing positive results for the future. A joint effort between the registry and Sydney Office worked to reduce the impediments to having the evidence destroyed. The disposal time for items included in that trial was reduced from the average eight months to four.

Other options to reduce the requirement to retain exhibits also are being explored. These include using



Seized drugs on the way to being incinerated.



Criminals tried to import 44 kilograms of liquid methamphetamine hidden in gel push-up bra inserts.

secondary evidence in trials, such as photos and video from when drug imports are being seized and deconstructed.

State Manager NSW lead an initiative under which drug wraps are destroyed 28 days after receiving the National Measurement Institute (NMI) certificates. This has been very successful and as a result, all other state managers have adopted the initiative.

“The secondary evidence can be used instead of holding on to the bulk 50 kilograms of cocaine, for example. There are also the samples and the NMI certificates that registries receive so there are options available.”

Project Kemble has sought support from the Commonwealth Department of Public Prosecutions (CDPP) for initiatives to reduce the requirement to retain exhibits. The CDPP are supportive of the AFP to using secondary evidence as appropriate. This is on a case by case basis, and investigators are encouraged to discuss destruction of property and exhibit items with CDPP members as part of their ongoing engagement throughout the case lifecycle.

## Regions

Former sworn member and Brisbane registrar Paula Smith says it’s a busy job that includes many different aspects. Along with the primary aim to manage property and exhibits, registrars are called on to present on induction courses, training sworn members in processing items and maintaining the quality of AFP data systems in relation to evidence.

“It’s a support role for members,” Paula says. “We always make sure we avail ourselves and our time for the members concerned. It’s actually quite a diverse role in all the aspects of property within the AFP with all the guidelines and the aide memoirs we have to deal with and know.”

As a former sworn member and a team leader, Paula she says it allows her to more fully understand what investigators require. “I think that works in my favour and to the investigators as well,” Paula says. “It’s not just cut and dry. There are many different aspects involved with an investigation and property is just a small part of it really.”

But Paula welcomes Project Kemble. While Registrars can’t identify property and exhibits for destruction, new guidelines do allow them to identify outstanding items with investigators. Paula says one memorable item was a motorbike seized on the Gold Coast.

“We had to find ways to store that vehicle and even just processing those types of seizures can be problematic.



All items need to be sealed – but how do you seal a motorbike? But it is one of those things you just have to work around. And then assist the officers identify ways of destroying it.”

For part-time registrars, they not only juggle the diversity of their Registrar duties but the need to balance the requirements of other equally demanding roles. Adelaide registrar Michelle Quintrell also performs the duties of special projects Registrar and coordinates the AFP’s operational database for the South Australia region.

Routine tasks include monthly reports, stocktakes, preparing and managing drug and exhibit destructions and provide assistance to members and outside agencies with property and exhibit related issues.

With some understatement, Michelle says she initially felt overwhelmed coming into the job. But with support from other registrars and management, grew in confidence and now enjoys her dual role. I love the variety and working independently, as no one day is

ever the same. I find that professionally fulfilling,” Michelle says.

Michael Field says he is committed to greater recognition of the Registrar role. He says the multifaceted responsibilities of the registrar are underrated and his intent is to promote their skills and talents more formally. The first step is to establish a formal duty statement that recognises the diversity of the Registrar role.

“At the moment, Registrars come under a generic role description – there is no real description of what their role is and what their duties are. They just fall into a standard administration role. One of things we are doing is defining their role. So it is very clear and what their duties actually are and what they do for the AFP.”

Michael says this enormous effort undertaken by registrars allows investigators to concentrate on their role knowing that the item seized as part of their investigations will be managed appropriately to assist in achieving outcomes.

[Click here to watch a video of the Operation Pendine media conference.](#)



## Creative criminals

You've got to hand it to criminals – well, at least some of them show a bit of creativity in their attempts to smuggle drugs across international borders. But a steamroller?

The AFP's property and exhibit registrars are responsible for the storage of property and exhibits seized during the course of an investigation on behalf of investigators.

Seized items come in many shapes and sizes – a bit like the recent investigation that uncovered 44 kilograms of liquid methamphetamine hidden in gel push-up bra inserts.

Some of the innovative 'nice-try-but-fail' attempts to smuggle drugs include suitcases, electronic items, furniture, car parts, and large volumes of smaller items – such as the bras inserts.

But one attempt that gets an A+ for effort is when 350 kilograms of cocaine and methamphetamine were discovered in a steamroller and other heavy machinery in November 2012.

Then again, a steam roller is as good as any other item if you are trying to make a profit from illicit drugs. Of course, it couldn't have been too clever – they got caught after all.

Two foreign nationals were arrested during Operation Pendine. A total of 235 kilograms of methamphetamine (estimated \$174 million street value) and 115 kilograms of cocaine (estimated \$63 million street value) were seized along with about \$150,000.

But what do you do with a steamroller when you're done with it as evidence? It turns out there are options.

The drugs end up in an incinerator, 'drug-wraps' can be broken down for incineration or metal objects can go into a recycler. But it's a bit hard to shove a whole steamroller into a crusher.

The steamroller, however, was auctioned off as a high value item. The money raised is provided to the AFP Treasury Team who then facilitate its transfer to the Australian Government.

As legislated by the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, the funds from confiscated assets are deposited into the Confiscated Assets Account, which is managed by the Australian Financial Security Authority on behalf of the Commonwealth.

The funds can be used to benefit the community through crime prevention, intervention or diversion programs or other law enforcement initiatives.



**A steam roller and other heavy machinery contained 350 kilograms of imported drugs.**