

## The National DNA Database

**The UK's National DNA Database is already the largest of its kind in the world. It is used by the police as a tool to solve crimes but has been criticised by some who argue that innocent people should not have their profile kept on it. Clare Wilson from *New Scientist* and Anna Fairclough from Liberty share their views on the pros and cons.**

**CW:** My name's Clare Wilson and I'm a medical journalist on *New Scientist* magazine.

**AF:** My name is Anna Fairclough, I'm a solicitor at Liberty, and Liberty is a pressure group which works to promote human rights and civil liberties in the UK.

**CW:** So the question is should there be a universal database, perhaps for everybody in the country, presumably taking samples from babies when they're born and of people coming into the country too. I can see both sides of the argument and I know a lot of people feel very strongly that this is a terrible encroachment on our civil liberties. I can see that argument but I can also see the advantages of having this database, the advantages that it would bring for solving more crimes.

**AF:** Everybody says, like, nothing to hide, nothing to fear – if you're not going to commit crime then what are you worried about? But there are actually quite a lot of problems with holding people's DNA.

**CW:** So at the moment we have people stored on the DNA database if they've ever been convicted of a crime, if they've ever been arrested for a crime and then found not guilty in the court, if they've ever been arrested but never even been charged with a crime their DNA remains on the database. So some people would say that that's unfair because in the eyes of the law you are innocent until proven guilty. So if you have never been proven guilty of a crime your DNA should be wiped from the database. Another way round it would be if we had a universal database – everybody's profile is stored on there from birth or from when they enter a country, and then it's equitable.

**AF:** Of course it would solve the discrimination aspect and to a large degree it would also solve the stigmatisation problem because everybody would be on it, but actually less than half a per cent of recorded crime in the UK is solved using DNA. Most crime has nothing to do with DNA and most criminals are already on the database, you don't need the whole population to be on it. So if we were to put the whole population on the DNA database it's going to be massively expensive, it's a huge project to sample the whole population plus visitors to the UK and the benefit to crime detection I think is likely to be minimal. In the last few years we've had massive expansion on the DNA database but the percentage of crimes solved using DNA hasn't increased at all, actually last year it went down. So I think a DNA database for the whole population just wouldn't improve crime detection at all really.

**CW:** So at the moment approximately half of all crime scene samples of DNA find a match on our existing DNA database, which currently covers about 5 million of the UK population; that's about

7.5 per cent of the UK's population. So in theory if we expanded that to include everybody you'd find a match every time.

**AF:** There are a lot of other problems that could arise if everybody was on the database, like data security – we've seen in the last few years some massive data blunders by the government where all the child benefit records were lost, people's bank details, members of the armed forces. If everybody's DNA was on a database, that information is incredibly useful to insurance companies, employers, people who want to conduct research into is there a criminal gene – things that we don't want our DNA to be used for. And I personally don't have enough confidence that the data would be sufficiently secure because there are always going to be people who have access to it and who could potentially be corrupted.

**CW:** So some people fear that the data could be somehow used against them, the government could find out details about them from their DNA profile. Now if you continued to store tissue samples from everybody, say a cheek swab or a sample of blood, if you continued to store that indefinitely then yes potentially some malevolent agency could then try and get more information about you. But you can solve that by not keeping tissue samples. So what you do is you take your tissue sample from somebody initially, you extract the DNA from it, you then record information about it in the form of just data and then you destroy the tissue samples, so all you have left then is a set of data points that can be used to identify you but you don't still retain that tissue sample, that living material. So you can't then get further information, further genetic information about somebody.

**AF:** The government does actually plan to get rid of all the DNA samples after six months whether or not you've been convicted of an offence and just to hold the DNA profiles, so just a sequence of numbers. And that profile doesn't contain very much information about the individual, it shows your ethnicity, it has the potential to reveal your family relationships, so it does say a lot about who you're related to and that's still very private information. One of the markers is weakly associated with diabetes. At the moment we don't necessarily know entirely what that profile could reveal in the future with development of science, so obviously the concerns are much, much less if you just have the profile, the number, and not the original bodily sample, but there still are concerns and we would still oppose a DNA database of profiles.

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