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Concerns Over Potential Future Use Of DNA Of Innocents On National Database

ScienceDaily (Jan. 14, 2008) — The inventor of DNA fingerprinting, Professor Sir Alec Jeffreys, of the University of Leicester, has voiced his concerns over the ethics of a DNA database.

Professor Jeffreys –known as the father of DNA fingerprinting–spoke out over the ‘significant ethical and social issues’ as the government launched an inquiry into the way the national DNA database is used. The UK database, with the DNA of over 4million people, was launched in 1995 and allows all DNA collected by forensics -- for whatever purposes -- to be stored indefinitely.

Professor Jeffreys, who is Royal Society Wolfson Research Professor in the Department of Genetics, invented DNA fingerprinting at the University of Leicester in 1984. The world renowned technique has revolutionised forensic science and has been used to resolve paternity disputes.

Professor Jeffreys said the database was a very powerful tool in the fight against crime but added he was concerned that the database was being populated by people who had not been convicted of any crime.

This was not the initial purpose of the database which was originally meant to hold the DNA of convicted criminals. Professor Jeffreys expressed concerns about the retention of innocent individuals on the National DNA Database and the use of kinship analysis in forensic investigations.

He said: "The national DNA database is a very powerful tool in the fight against crime, but recent developments such as the retention of innocent people's DNA raises significant ethical and social issues.

"The real concern I have in the UK is what I see as a sort of 'mission creep'. When the DNA database was initially established, it was to database DNA from criminals so if they re-offended, they could be picked up.

"Now hundreds of thousands of entirely innocent people are populating that database - people who have come to the police's attention, for example, by being arrested or charged with a crime and subsequently released.

"This was not the initial purpose of the database which was originally meant to hold the DNA of convicted criminals. I have real concerns about the retention of innocent individuals on the National DNA Database. There are also issues concerning familial searching, where the database is used to identify possible relatives of an unknown suspect in a criminal investigation."

During a law lecture at the University of Leicester the Right Honourable Lord Justice Sedley, a senior appeal court judge, also highlighted concerns over the DNA database.

Lord Justice Sedley, who has been a prominent member of the Court of Appeal since 1999, gave a

lecture entitled Rarely Pure and Never Simple: The Law and the Truth. In it, he called for a national DNA database to be set up which recorded every individual in the country as well as those leaving or entering.

He argued that under the present system the difficulties in securing reliable evidence have led to miscarriages of justice. Further, the only samples that are currently held are from persons who have been arrested, whether or not a charge or conviction follows. This, he added "has the unfortunate effect of putting the innocent on a par with guilty".

Lord Justice Sedley said the use of the DNA data would have to be restricted, as it is now, to the purposes of preventing, detecting, investigating and prosecuting crime.

He added that there was also a need for a separate national DNA register, separate from policing, and retained for purposes like identifying disaster victims or tracing lost children.

Adapted from materials provided by [University of Leicester](#), via [AlphaGalileo](#).

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University of Leicester (2008, January 14). Concerns Over Potential Future Use Of DNA Of Innocents On National Database. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved February 25, 2009, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/01/080111224007.htm>