

Editorial: Postgraduate Forum on Genetics and Society

January 2007 saw the ending of a consultation period about the future of the National DNA Database facilitated by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.¹ Those who govern the National DNA Database sometimes argue, in the hope of dispelling common misunderstandings, that the ‘genetic information’ it contains is not of the same kind as that commonly associated with genetic testing.² And as far as this argument goes, this is correct. Stored in the database is information about so-called ‘genetic fingerprints.’ In many ways, these are like the fingerprints we all know: while genetic fingerprints are individually unique, they reveal very little else about the bearer of that DNA. The National DNA Database allows genetic fingerprints collected at crime scenes to be matched up with genetic fingerprints already in the database. In this way, suspects can be identified.

Current public debate stresses the urgency of concerns surrounding collections of human DNA. Although the papers in this special issue do not directly discuss the National DNA Database, they can all be read as addressing some of the conceptual, legal, and governance issues involved. Above all, one may want to distinguish between ‘information’ about genetic fingerprints, which can be described as residing in a database, and the DNA from which these fingerprints are derived. Molecular DNA can not, after all, be entered into a database, a point made clear in the paper by García-Sancho. Crucially, the National DNA Database currently stores not only genetic fingerprints but also the DNA samples, or what I call “bits of people.” Sometimes these DNA samples are subjected to further experiments to derive additional information about the bearer of the DNA for the purposes of forensic investigation - during familial searching, for example.

Another paper in this issue, by Toom, discusses the legal status of DNA samples of this kind in the Netherlands. This raises important questions. How is the DNA held by the National DNA Database legally related to the person from whom it was obtained? What level of control over this DNA sample does law grant to the original bearer? This suggests that, as our ability to derive ‘genetic information’ from DNA expands, the concerns raised by the National DNA Database – which is perhaps better described as a combined Database and Biobank – are likely to expand as well. In this context, the paper by Birch, which focuses on the ideological dimensions of trends in biotechnology, provides additional food for thought.

Finally, Hanlin and Langlois discuss the governance of genomics. Given the power that may be derived from the National DNA Database, we might also ask, with a view to the consultation of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, whether it is more productive to focus on content – genetic fingerprints versus DNA samples – or on the manner in which the National DNA Database is governed. While the answers to none of these questions are obvious, the papers in this issue of *Genomics, Society and Policy* provide a starting point for addressing them. They were all first presented at the University of Cardiff in September 2005 for the 9th Annual Colloquium of the Postgraduate Forum for Genetics in Society, entitled ‘The Genetic Information Age’. The subsequent 2006 colloquium of this postgraduate organisation is also reviewed in this issue by Douglas. Together the papers suggest that, even if different kinds of

‘genetic information’ were disambiguated, there would still be room for a broad range of concerns about the National DNA Database.

Adam Bostanci

ESRC Centre for Genomics in Society, University of Exeter, UK
Guest Editor

¹ <http://www.nuffieldbioethics.org/go/ourwork/bioinformationuse/introduction>

² ‘De-mystifying the myth of The National DNA Database,’ talk by Chief Constable Tony Lake QPM, Chair of the National DNA Database Board at ‘Governing Genomics: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Regulation of the Biosciences’, ESRC Centre for Genomics in Society, University of Exeter, 25-27 January 2007.