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TOP STORY

New DNA project's goal is to impact human trafficking

BY ELIZABETH BASSETT
September 07, 2009

A child living on the streets in a developing country may have no idea how he ended up there. He may not remember or know who his parents are or where he was born. The same applies to many children who are caught up in various types of human trafficking, forced into prostitution, forced labor, military activities or adoptions.

Dr. Jose Lorente, director of the Lab of Genetic Identification at the University of Granada in Spain, would frequently see children living on their own during his travels and ask about where they came from.

"I was many times told that there was no way to connect them back to the families," he said. "Then I thought that DNA could help."

Using DNA to match children back to their parents is the central focus of a new project that is being lead by Lorente and by Arthur Eisenberg, co-director of the UNT Center for Human Identification and professor and chairman of the department of forensic and investigative genetics. Lorente and Eisenberg have long had a professional relationship and close friendship, they say, and the new project — the DNA Program for Kids Identification with DNA Systems, or DNA-PROKIDS — just received a major grant to continue international efforts to put children back with their families.

The Life Technologies Foundation, a global biotech tools company headquartered in Carlsbad, Calif., awarded a \$500,000 grant to DNA-PROKIDS to create DNA collection kits, hire staff to help coordinate international efforts and process DNA samples, and to encourage more international collaboration through education and networking, Eisenberg said.

"Human trafficking, especially with children, is huge business," he said. "It's starting to rival drug trafficking and arms trafficking in terms of the magnitude of dollars spent."

While estimating how many are caught up in human trafficking is difficult, the U.S. State Department estimated in 2003 that about 800,000 to 900,000 people are bought, sold or forced across international borders annually. The large majority are women and children, Eisenberg said, and organized crime rings are increasingly involved because human trafficking is far less dangerous than, for example, arms trafficking.

Lorente first thought of using DNA to identify children and parents back in 2000, he said, and in 2004 started DNA-PROKIDS. He chose to work with the UNT Health Science Center, including Eisenberg and his colleagues, because of the Fort Worth school's experience working with forensic genetics and missing persons cases as well as the lab's capabilities. The pilot work was done in



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Sep 2009						
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2006, primarily in Mexico and Guatemala. Eisenberg said children from orphanages and adoption centers were tested, and Lorente said 200 matches were made—the children had been kidnapped or somehow smuggled away from their parents into these institutions.

Working with individual countries as well as with international agencies, like Interpol, is essential to make sure everything adheres to laws and standards in various parts of the world, Eisenberg said. But he said what is equally important is educating the public at large, letting parents know that if their child is missing, there is something they can do by sending in a DNA sample — usually gathered from a cheek swab or finger prick.

Public education, like posters or public announcements, may also act as some kind of a deterrent to dissuade criminals from trafficking children, but “this is too big of a business to think you’ll ever stop it,” he said.

“When these people are being paid more for one baby than they’d make in several years, one poster isn’t going to stop it,” he said.

Fort Worth will serve as a North American hub for much of the work with the project, and Granada will be another hub in Europe. In late October, representatives from various countries will gather in Granada to learn more about how to develop and international database of children and parents. Whole genetic profiles will not ever be used, Eisenberg said; instead, a series of markers that are typically used for identification will be kept on file to protect the privacy of those involved. Lorente said Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and the Philippines are expected to be represented at the meeting; other large countries like India, Indonesia, Brazil and China are also expected to participate, Eisenberg said.

“They have such large population bases that 10,000 kids disappearing does not even make a blip,” Eisenberg said. “. . . Unless we’re all sharing information, nothing’s going to happen.”

Before the Life Technologies Foundation grant, much of the funding for the project came from the Spanish government supporting Lorente’s work, Eisenberg said. Since this is such a large undertaking, future funding would have to come from individual countries as well as international organizations.

Even small successes, like the matches done during the pilot phase of the work, have definite impacts on children and their families, Eisenberg said. Both he and Lorente are hoping that the project does grow, though, and will impact children worldwide.

“In the future, no doubt, I’d like to see all countries involved, no exceptions at all,” Lorente said.

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Upcoming Events

Tuesday, September 08th, 2009

'What Keeps You Up at Night?' - 06:00 PM

Trinity Perspectives: Views of an Urban River - 10:00 AM

Wednesday, September 09th, 2009

35W Coalition Quarterly Meeting - 09:30 AM

Trinity Perspectives: Views of an Urban River - 10:00 AM

Thursday, September 10th, 2009

Art Show - 04:00 PM



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