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DNA: Familial matches used in other states

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A form of DNA search already utilized by some states cannot only lead to the identification of unknown victims, but their killers as well.

In California, however, the system is not being utilized.

By matching a certain number of alleles in a strand of an unknown person's DNA, law enforcement officials can track down members of their immediate family, and in doing so develop leads to the suspect's whereabouts.

"Not only can it be used to track offenders that we are not able to identify but it could be used to exonerate innocent people," said John Thomas, Victorville deputy district attorney.

He added that in South Carolina, by using a familial search, a man was set free because his brother had actually committed the murder he was serving time for.

Thomas handles cold cases for San Bernardino County and could benefit greatly from familial searches.

Helen Brooks, of Apple Valley, and Rita Cobb, of Lucerne Valley were both sexually abused and murdered in 1985, and are both cold cases that Thomas is actively working.

DNA was collected from both crime scenes and run through CODIS — a database started in the 1990s that now has more than 4 million DNA samples from convicted felons — but didn't match anyone in the system.

If the unknown suspect's DNA provides a close match with someone in his or her family who is in CODIS, law enforcement officials would have a strong lead in knowing who to talk to identify and track down the offender.

"In this case it's not just another lead," Thomas said. "It's a lead that is based on science and genetics."

To identify the familial matches, nothing more would have to be done in the lab than is already taking place, said Mehul Anjaria of Human Identification Technologies, a private lab in Redlands that specializes in DNA analysis.

Opponents of familial searches claim that it's a violation of privacy rights, said Thomas.

"Their argument is basically that it's unfair that the offenders become targets because their family members have commit crimes," Thomas said, adding that 46 percent of people that are incarcerated have had relatives also incarcerated.

Another criticism of the idea is that there is a disproportionate share of DNA sample in the database that came from men of minority groups, having more of an impact on them than white people, Thomas said.

"It sounds like a wonderful idea," said Sen. George Runner, R-Lancaster. "The problem is right now we don't have the m or lab technicians to analyze the current DNA we have in the system."

Thomas likens the familial search to using a get-away car.

"If a witness gets a partial match from the license plate, you're going to follow that up," Thomas said. "You're not going to ignore it because it's not a complete match."

Thomas also said that courts have upheld the constitutionality of the offender database, saying that those in it have a diminished expectation of their privacy rights because of their offenses.

There is also a special need for law enforcement to investigate future crimes efficiently, which outweighs privacy rights of individuals, added Thomas.

Currently, there is discussion in California and Texas to develop software to make familial searches easier, said Sara Katsanis, genetics research associate for the Genetics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

Familial searches cannot only lead to the identification of suspects but also of victims, said Thomas. He added that the V Valley is a popular place for dumping victims that were killed out of the area, leaving him with several John Does and Jar Does.

While states such as New York, Massachusetts and Colorado continue to take advantage of familial searches, California continue to do without.

"It's a great investigative tool," said Anjaria. "We need to be slow bringing it along as to not jeopardize the database as a whole."



Photo courtesy Sal So

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