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## **Construction of the Austrian DNA Intelligence Database using STR Profiling<sup>1</sup>**

**Austriacka baza danych profili genetycznych stworzona dla  
potrzeb kryminalistyki w oparciu o loci STR**

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This paper presents the logistic concept developed by the central laboratory of the Austrian DNA Intelligence database with respect to the laboratory's strategy, which was designed around the organizational requirements of the project.

**Key words: DNA intelligence databases, STRs, laboratory automation, LIMS**

**Słowa kluczowe: Kryminalistyczne bazy danych profili DNA, loci STR, automatyzacja procesów laboratoryjnych, LIMS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper presents the logistic concept developed by the central laboratory of the Austrian DNA Intelligence database with respect to the laboratory's strategy, which was designed around the organizational requirements of the project.

DNA intelligence databases have become important forensic tools in the past few years and have been established world-wide. Like fingerprint databanks, they serve as central platforms for the storage and comparison of data. Although the structure of DNA databases strongly depends on the political and legal situation of a particular country, they share a common ground of fundamental principles and rules [2].

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The basic concept behind a typical DNA database consists of two parts: the executive part which provides the samples, and the laboratory, which investigates the samples and types the corresponding DNA profiles. Usually, the laboratory processes anonymous samples, while the database stores the personal data related to these samples, but does not have access to the DNA sample. Data confidentiality is a factor which should not be underestimated, and is closely linked with the idea of being unbiased. The confidence of all parties involved (including the public opinion) depends heavily on this.

In Austria, the DNA Intelligence Database, which was established on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1997, is a cooperation between the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and the Institute of Legal Medicine at the University of Innsbruck. Personal data and DNA samples are kept completely separate for the reasons mentioned above. Another important aspect is that the laboratory cannot attain personal information about the individual through the analysis of samples. The executive manages the DNA database located at the Ministry of the Interior, which includes all personal records. The performance and success of the DNA database project strongly depends on this logistic concept, which combines both executive work and sample management in the laboratory. Although completely separated from each other on the personal data level, good cooperation between both is essential for the professional efficiency of the project.

## LOGISTICS

Epithelial cells, taken by means of buccal scrapes from suspects serve as the source of DNA. To ensure the reproducible quality of the respective DNA and therefore a high success rate in obtaining a valid DNA profile from the buccal scrape samples, a special kit was designed and produced by the laboratory. This kit contains 1 pair of gloves, 2 sterile buccal scrape devices (Omni swabs, Fitzco, MN, USA) and 2 reaction tubes filled with 1.4 ml absolute isopropanol (2-Propanol, Merck). A blank form (EKIS F21), which executive agents have to use when assessing the personal records and fingerprints of a suspect is included in each kit. This form was adapted for the DNA database by adding a barcode, which is put on the form in the laboratory prior to sending it to the executive agents. The same barcode identifies the two reaction tubes as well as the envelope, which holds the kit. In this way, it is possible to distinguish between reference samples and "anonymize" them at the same time. Since all barcodes are produced by the laboratory, reference samples can be identified and controlled when they re-enter the laboratory for analysis. This barcode serves as the only link between a DNA profile attained in the laboratory and the personal records and fingerprints of a suspect. Throughout the entire laboratory operation, a sample is referred to by its barcode. This is made possible by a computer program (LIMS, Laboratory Information Management System), which was designed specifically for the Austrian DNA database project.

## SAMPLE PROCESSING

The laboratory's strategy was designed around the kit described above and allows for high sample through-put and minimal hands-on-lab time. Therefore, the number of reaction tubes necessary for the laboratory process was reduced to only four generations [1]. Our inhouse software for handling samples and data (LIMS) as well as the instrumental set-up for DNA extraction and STR profiling allows for a high degree of automation on the basis of both, 1.5 ml tubes format and the 96-well microtiter plate format, making a high sample through-put possible and minimizing the risk of confusing samples.

Each reaction tube returned to the laboratory with a buccal scrape sample for analysis is controlled by reading the barcode information with a barcode scanner. Subsequently, the sample is forwarded to DNA extraction and PCR set-up. Both DNA extraction and PCR set-up are performed on a 4 - channel robotic microplate processor (Plato 3002, ROSYS/ ANTHOS, Switzerland). In order to prevent cross-contamination, the robotic unit uses disposable sampling tips.

The isopropanol is removed manually from the vial containing the buccal scrape by means of a steel needle attached to a suction pump. The reaction tubes are then loaded on a thermomixer (ASYS HITECH, Austria) specifically designed for the robotic device. While loading the samples, the barcode on the tubes is controlled again. These samples are then incubated at 56°C for 1 hour to evaporate residual isopropanol. Then, 1 ml of the Chelex extraction solution (8% Chelex, 20 µg Proteinase K) is added to each sample. Samples are incubated for 45 min at 56°C while being centrifuged at 500 rpm and denatured at 95°C for 10 min. Prior to denaturing, the robotic arm places a preheated lid on the samples to prevent evaporation and precipitation of the DNA extract on the inner side of the lid that seals the sample tubes. After moderate agitation and cooling (5 min) the lids of the tubes are opened manually. At this point, it is possible for the technician to check the samples. 200 µl of the supernatant is transferred by the robot to a new reaction tube (second generation), which is, again, barcode-labeled. 5 µl of the DNA extract is diluted in 100 µl a. bidest. (Merck), and 5 µl of the diluted DNA is combined with 7 µl SGM PCR mastermix [3, 4] and 8 µl a. bidest. (Merck). After PCR set-up, the amplification tubes are closed with sets of strip caps and subjected to PCR amplification in the post-PCR section of the DNA laboratory.

An aliquot of 2 µl of the amplification products is transferred to a new micro tube (fourth generation) and combined with 16µl deionized formamide and internal lane standard (Genescan Tamra 500, PE) by means of a robotic pipetting device (ASYS HITECH, Austria). Prior to loading on the CE310 Genetic analyzer, the samples are denatured for 2 min at 90°C and cooled rapidly on ice. ABI PRISM Genescan profiles of the amplified DNA fragments are exported to the ABI PRISM Genotyper Software System (Genotyper 2.0). By running Genotyper macros, category offset, decoding and "visualization" of alleles is performed.

## RESULTS

The laboratory strategy of the Austrian DNA Intelligence database was established for a midsize DNA laboratory, performing casework analysis and paternity cases. The aim was to introduce a simple and straightforward laboratory process for the typing of reference samples. Time-consuming steps, or steps that require unnecessary reaction tubes were avoided to minimize the risk of contamination and confusing of samples. Consequently, Chelex extraction was adapted to automated handling performed by a robotic device. Additionally, quantification of the DNA extract was circumvented.

13.364 reference samples were typed since October, 1997. Of these, 2.531 (19%) analyses served as extraction and amplification controls, and as allelic ladders for allele calling. Of 10.833 true reference samples, 9967 (92%) gave a full STR profile at first attempt, demonstrating the reliability of the laboratory's strategy. The analysis of the remaining 849 samples had to be repeated. 578 brought a valid result through another PCR amplification with adjusted DNA template concentration, 241 samples had to be extracted once again. Only 2 samples gave partial profiles, whereas only 2 samples brought no result at all.

After undergoing a routine of checks and counter-checks by experienced geneticists in order to minimize the risk of misinterpretation, the independently verified data-sets are compared by the LIMS software.

The next step is the transfer and entry of the data into the Database of the Ministry of the Interior, together with profiles attained from pieces of evidence. Cross-referencing between both may lead to so-called "hits", and the barcode-labeled alleles are now reconnected with the personal data in the database, or stay there for future reference.

After having travelled a full circle, the executive and/or judicial forces can now take action and exclude a suspect which results in his immediate release and restitution, or lead to a further decision with the additional weight and evidence of the DNA profile.

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Praca niniejsza opisuje podstawy strategii i organizacji centralnego laboratorium pracującego dla potrzeb austriackiej bazy danych profili genetycznych. Kryminalistyczne bazy danych profili DNA stały się w ostatnich latach ważnymi narzędziami w rękach wymiaru sprawiedliwości. Bazy te, stworzone już w wielu krajach świata, są centralnymi platformami służącymi do przechowywania i porównywania danych. Choć ich struktura różni się w zależności od politycznych i prawnych uregulowań właściwych dla danego państwa, podstawowe zasady przyświecające ich tworzeniu i funkcjonowaniu pozostają wspólne. Typowa baza danych profili DNA jest podzielona na dwie części - jednostkę zarządzającą, która dostarcza próbki oraz laboratorium, które przeprowadza badania i uzyskuje profile genetyczne. Laboratorium bada zwykle próbki anonimowe, a w bazie danych przechowywane są właściwe dla nich dane personalne. Z kolei jednostka zarządzająca bazą nie ma dostępu do próbek DNA. Poufność danych jest tutaj

czynnikiem trudnym do przecenienia i wiąże się ściśle z kryterium bezstronności, które decyduje o zaufaniu wszystkich stron zainteresowanych bazą danych (w tym opinii publicznej). W Austrii kryminalistyczna baza danych profili DNA została ustanowiona 1 października 1997 r. przez Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych we współpracy z Instytutem Medycyny Sądowej Uniwersytetu w Innsbrucku. Z powodów wyłożonych powyżej, dane personalne i próbki DNA zostały całkowicie rozdzielone. Laboratorium nie może mieć również dostępu do danych osobowych poprzez analizę próbek. Baza danych, wraz ze wszystkimi szczegółami personalnymi przechowywana jest przez centrum zarządzające zlokalizowane w Ministerstwie Spraw Wewnętrznych. DNA ekstrahuje się z komórek nabłonkowych uzyskiwanych z wymazów policzkowych. Laboratorium DNA opracowało specjalny zestaw do pobierania materiału biologicznego, obejmujący parę rękawiczek, dwie sterylne wymazówki i dwie próbówki z izopropanolem. Do zestawu dołączony jest pusty formularz, który jednostka zarządzająca bazą danych wypełnia szczegółami personalnymi i informacją

o odciskach palców podejrzanego. W laboratorium DNA formularz ten, jak również próbówki oraz koperta zawierająca cały zestaw opatrywane są kodem kreskowym. Kod ten pozwala na wewnątrzlaboratoryjną identyfikację próbki, zapewniając jednocześnie jej anonimowość. Na wszystkich etapach analizy laboratoryjnej, próbka identyfikowana jest poprzez nadany jej kod kreskowy z zastosowaniem specjalnego programu komputerowego (LIMS) stworzonego specjalnie dla potrzeb austriackiej bazy danych. Każda próbówka zawierająca wymaz policzkowy trafiająca do analizy kontrolowana jest za pomocą czytnika kodów kreskowych. Próbka trafia następnie do ekstrakcji DNA i PCR przeprowadzanych z wykorzystaniem czterokanałowego robota do mikroplątek (Plato 3002, ROSYS/ ANTHOS, Szwajcaria). Ekstrakcję DNA prowadzi się w roztworze Chelex'u (8% Chelex, 20 pg proteinazy K). Próbki amplifikuje się z wykorzystaniem zestawu SGM, a produkty PCR rozdziela się w obecności wewnętrznego standardu wielkości (Genescan Tamra 500, PE) w kapilarnym analizatorze DNA ABI PRISM 310. Genotypowanie przeprowadza się z wykorzystaniem programu ABI PRISM Genotyper 2.0. Powyższa strategia opracowana została dla średniej wielkości laboratorium DNA zajmującego się analizą dowodów rzeczowych

tych rodzajów wyników może prowadzić do tzw. „trafienia”. Oznaczone kodem kreskowym allele zostają przyporządkowane odpowiednim danym osobowym z bazy lub pozostają tutaj jako przyszły materiał referencyjny. Dzięki wspomnianej procedurze przedstawiciele wymiaru sprawiedliwości mogą teraz podjąć odpowiednie kroki zmierzające bądź to do natychmiastowego wykluczenia i uwolnienia podejrzanego, bądź też do dalszych etapów sprawy z uwzględnieniem dodatkowego dowodu w postaci profilu DNA.

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