

Better DNA database 'would help fight crime'

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EXPANDING the national DNA database would go a long way towards helping police catch rapists and other criminals, according to a DNA campaigner who wants Parliament to pass a draft bill enabling this.

But a prominent forensic scientist and investigator has warned there is a serious risk of such a database being abused.

According to current legislation, law enforcement cannot expand the current searchable national DNA database, and is not required to take DNA profiles from suspects and offenders.

Speaking against a backdrop of national revulsion at the gang rape and murder of Bredasdorp teenager Anene Booysen, the executive director of the DNA project, Vanessa Lynch, said an

increase in the number of profiles on the DNA database would help catch offenders: "Basically, the more profiles, the better the chance of a match."

A draft of the Criminal Procedure Amendment Bill – long stuck in Parliament – was to be presented to the cabinet soon, said Zweli Mntsi, spokesman for the Ministry of Police.

The draft bill will apparently require DNA to be taken from suspects and offenders, permit police to expand the scope of the current forensic DNA database to help solve crimes, and allow police officers to collect DNA.

Troy Martins, spokeswoman for the ANC Women's League, said an expanded DNA database would act as a deterrent to rapists, and help improve prosecutions.

"All too often, perpetrators get off due to lack of evidence," said

Martins, adding that the league would support "anything that could assist police in apprehending rapists and creating fear (in criminals) that they would be apprehended."

Dianne Kohler Barnard, DA police spokeswoman, said the bill would be an example of "21st-century policing that would help pull this country forward".

She pointed out that it would help cut the backlog of court cases, by closing those that were linked to the same individual.

A forerunner of the current bill was on the table some years back, but the bill's passage stalled in committees. The bill was subsequently revised and split in two, with the part dealing with fingerprints made law.

Lynch said a DNA database would be an "incredibly strong criminal intelligence tool" to aid police in convicting rapists, as

well as enabling law enforcement to link seemingly unrelated rape cases where serial rapists were involved.

Dr Eugenia D'Amato, of the University of the Western Cape's forensic DNA laboratory, said such a database acted as a means of fighting crime.

"If you find someone who has committed a crime, it would be possible to link them to previous offences," she said, adding that if such a laboratory collected only DNA samples from suspects and offenders, there would be little chance of it being misused.

There would have to be strict controls and oversight of how data was collected, entered, stored and accessed.

But forensic detective and author David Klatzow was concerned that a DNA database was a move towards a "Big Brother state", with the potential

for abuse and corruption.

A raw DNA sample had immense commercial value – for example, to insurance companies – and there was the risk someone would be able to buy data from corrupt police officials. There was also the chance samples would be contaminated by the police who handled them.

The collection of DNA is currently governed by the Criminal Procedure Act of 1977, which predates DNA analysis.

There is no legislative framework for who may ask for DNA to be collected from a suspect, and how long their DNA profile may be kept on a database.

The draft bill would allow trained police to collect DNA samples from suspects and offenders, and enter the resulting DNA profile in a national database managed by the police's forensic science lab.