

GENETICAL IDENTIFICATION OF "MISSING" CHILDREN IN ARGENTINA.-

Jorge Berra, Diana Grinspon, Norberto Liwski, Morris Tidball Binz (Equipo de Filiación Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Montevideo 459, Capital Federal, República Argentina).

Between the years 1975 and 1983 in Argentina, hundreds of children were kidnapped with their parents or were born during the imprisonment of their mothers in secret detention camps and were then given to persons or families generally connected with the repression body. This monstrosity was the product of a deliberate, organic and systematic plan put into execution by the Military Dictatorship in order to produce terror among the people and achieve their objectives. Important pediatric specialists have compared the situation to slavery. In general, the parents of these children are still missing.

In 1977 the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo is created, an organism for human Rights, recognized world-wide because of the efforts in trying to return these children to their legitimate families.

Up to now, the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo have received reports related to 189 missing children, of whom 58 were kidnapped and 131 were born in captivity.

Thirty-five children have already been found as a result of a continuous and anxious search, counting with the support of the people. Four children had died, 12 are still living with their "foster" family and 9 have been returned to their legitimate families. The cases of 10 children presumably missing and under the charge of persons connected with the repression body, are pending before Courts of Justice with the purpose of verifying their identity and then return these children to their legitimate families.

Four of the children found had died, three of them murdered by the Armed Forces and the other was left to die, abandoned in a hospital.

Prior agreement between the families, 12 children are still living with their "foster" family. These children have their real names, know their origin and keep in touch with their real family.

Nine children have been returned. In one of the cases, the return was ordered by the Court of Appeals. The way in which the restitution is carried out, has been adapted considering the circumstances of each case in particular, counting with the support of a group of persons belonging to different professions formed by doctors, psychologists, lawyers, etc. None of the children suffered psychological descompensation whether at the time of restitution, nor afterwards. In all the cases, the restitution has been a positive and therapeutical event for the child, and all the children enjoy both physical and mental health.

The need of counting with an efficient method to prove the identity of a child, of whom, many times, not even its sex was known, was necessary from the start of the search. A system capable of verifying with validity the biological link of a child with its corresponding family group and, at the same time, capable of excluding false parents, was necessary.

Different possibilities were investigated. Finger prints and foot prints are useful only for the cases of kidnapped children and when the same have been properly taken. The anthropobiometrical methods, under investigation in U.S.A., have no legal validity. The machine of Age, that would permit to rebuild the face of the child in time, is useless for children born in prison.

Due to the phenomenon of the disappearance of children in Argentina and the fact that Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo set forth the problem, different scientific groups, that joined in the cause, have been working on the finding of methods and concepts that would enable them return their stolen identity to these children.

Due to its great variety and stability in time, the study of genetic markers has shown to be an adequate method to prove the identity of these children. On the other hand, already since 1971, there exist precedents in world-wide literature in the field of affiliation, showing how to establish the biological link between a child and his family for those cases of absence of one or both parents.

These efforts have allowed to reach to the concept of "Index of Grandparentship", which has been applied successfully in

in the above mentioned cases.

In our country, due to the petition put forward by the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, these studies are carried out in the Service of Immunology of the Durand Hospital located in Buenos Aires. This is an official institution that counts with skilled professionals and an adequate functional structure. Eight systems of blood groups and the systems HLA-A, B and DR which add up to an exclusion average of 98 %, are been studied. In a chort while it will have a staff skilled in the study of plasmatic proteins and erythrocytic isoenzymes. Frecuency charts of Argentine populations are used to assess the results of the systems HLA and the great mayority of the blood groups. Caucasian charts are used for those groups for which information is lacking due to being a mayority in the origin of the Argentine population.

Up to now, it has been possible to confirm the identity of three missing children and of one abandoned child. In one of the cases, the biological link with the petitioning group was completely set aside. Another case is still being studied. Except in the case of the abandoned child, where we could study the mother, due to the absence of parents, the rest of the investigations were carried out, according to relatives available, with grandparents, uncles, and brothers of the supposed missing child.

In none of the cases, the families who had these children, in spite of alleging being the biological parent, allowed their genetic markers to be studied. There exist court orders to carry out the studies on six children, but these have not yet been done due to the objection of the imposed parents. In two of the cases the court order was upheld by the Court of Appeals. One of the decisions authorized the compulsory taking of blood samples to the minor notwithstanding of the reluctancy of the imposed parents.

It is impossible to say when the last Missing Child will be found. Some will be identified soon, while others will wait years. In some of the cases, it shall be the children themselves, upon adulthood, who shall find out about their real origin. To ascertain the proper conditions to enable the identification of these children beyond illness, absence or death of relative, is

essential. For said purpose, it is necessary to keep all the genetic information of these children's relatives. To achieve this, Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, by means of petitions presented before the Executive, Legislative and Judicial Powers, have worked ardously in order to create a National Bank of Genetic Data of Relatives of Missing Children. Likewise, the National Bank of Genetic Data shall also have to be applied to the relatives of stolen children, thus constituting a useful measure to prevent the commercial traffic of minors.

This genetic information shall have to be safely and properly kept for a period of at least sixty years.

The studies of the genetic markers must be carried out on every child suspected of being a Missing Child. It must be possible to crossmatch the results, by means of proper computer programmes, with the data filed in the National Bank of Genetic Data. It must be possible to crossmatch the information of children suspected of being missing but whose relatives have not been found through the National Bank of Genetic Data, with the data of transplant banks or similar institutions.

The Affiliation Team of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo has prepared and/or received up to now, the family-trees of 107 family groups (71 % of the non-found children). A scheme of the family tree including three generations, together with instructions of how there are to be filled with the name and surname, address, country and health conditions, was sent to all the family groups.

Only 101 families shall count with the "Index of Grandparenthood" to prove, when the time comes, that a certain child belongs to its biological group.

A little over 500 persons are to be studied immediately. According to the frequency in the reception of reports and to the calculation of the total number of Missing Children made by Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, we estimate that the total number of persons to be analysed adds to 2000.

Up to now, 79 persons, members of the family groups of 15 Missing Children, have been studied for the files of the National Bank of Genetic Data.

Even today, we are still having many difficulties in carrying out our task. Some of them are linked with the powerful interests which we have to face in the task of returning their true identity to these children. On the other hand, the method of identification by means of genetic markers is totally unknown to Argentine judges who, many times, are reluctant to give these studies the importance which they deserve. In this way, the court orders are postponed, both in the case of the children and the grandparents. Many grandparents have died without the corresponding judge having upheld the petition to order an expert witness's exam to be carried out. These studies are also unknown to the experts that form part of the Forensic Medical Staff who, in one case, confused in their report the concepts of "inclusion" and "exclusion" and thus reduced the percentage of the index of grandparenthood.

The provisions establishing that the relatives of Missing Children have to pay for the studies of the genetic markers are still in force. The Military Government was responsible for the disappearance of children, Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo are able to get the reagents due to the scarce economic resources and, in the end, the relatives of missing children have to pay for the studies. This situation requires an immediate change.

The identification of the Missing Children and their restitution to their legitimate families is an ethical duty which, keeping in mind the restoration of principles and order, society has the unavoidable obligation of promoting supporting.

This situation shall benefit not only the Missing Children but also the children on the whole, who shall never again have to undergo the violation of their most essential human rights when being deprived of their identity, their family and their freedom.

In order to achieve the monumental task of the National Bank of Genetical Data, the taking part and support of the Argentine government, the rigorous cooperation of the affected relatives and the help of the international scientific community are essential. Taking into account the absence of parents and, taking into consideration that the relatives will not be at reach to repeat the studies, it is necessary to work out a reasonable record

which would, at the same time, reduce costs.

The legal validity and safekeeping in the preservation of the samples, which implies the fractioning of the different components of the blood, must be solved with accuracy. Each sample must be kept in a proper manner so as to guarantee the viability of the same and taking into account future field of investigation (as, for example, polymorphism of DNA).

The usefulness of identification by means of the study of the proteins in the hair and dental casts shall have to be decided upon.

In the cases for which it is possible to recover the remains of the murdered parents, it is of great interest to establish the possibility and the degree of usefulness in investigating the genetic markers of these remains. In order to set up a National Bank of Genetic Data, the support of the international scientific community is fundamental. It is necessary to establish channels of scientific advice and exchange that would allow reaching a solution with respect to the multiple problems that will, without doubt, arise in carrying out this monumental task. Furthermore, due to the scarce economic resources of the Durand Hospital, it is fundamental to count with support in order to provide the necessary reagents in order to carry out the studies of the National Bank of Genetic Data.

Due to the volume and complexity of the genetic data to be dealt with and, taking into account the experience accumulated in this field, it is necessary to count with proper computers and computer programmes in order to carry out this task.

Due to the fact that about 20% of the relatives of the Missing Children reside abroad, it shall be necessary for these persons to be analysed at Centers of an acknowledged scientific level that shall have to send the results and a blood sample to the National Bank of Genetic Data.