

Biobank occupiers want their DNA back Research participants feel abused

By: Michael Craighton

LEEUWARDEN - 'I donated for science, not for commercial use' says accountant Ad van der Pol. Furious about the policies of biobank LifeLines, he and others have occupied the Leeuwarden branch since Saturday.

Since 2006, LifeLines and ten thousand inhabitants of the three Northern provinces have stored blood and urine for the purpose of DNA- and protein research. In the next 30 years, 165.000 people are expected to participate, including 35.000 children. By storing their blood and urine, combined with personal information about diseases, medication, life style and nutrition, the researchers hope to improve their understanding of the development of chronic disease.



These noble ends are no longer trusted by the occupiers and other donors. On behalf of hundreds of members, the recently founded organization 'In charge of our biobank' reclaims the donated tissues and information. The organization warns for commercial interests. 'Individuals who consider to donate DNA and other bio-materials have to be aware of commercial companies determining the research agenda', explains a spokesperson. 'In addition, they can apply for patents on genes that are identified in the biobank'.

The critical organization is supported by Tjeerd Rijmstra, medical sociologist in Groningen. 'Increased obesitas, diabetes and asthma are, above all, caused by poor environmental conditions and bad lifestyle habits. Not because of bad genes.' Reason for occupier Femke de Jong

for ceasing her participation in LifeLines completely: 'For improving the air quality and ensuring that people get more exercise, no biobank is needed'

Commercial manager Ben Terweij of LifeLines acknowledges that the biobank offers financial opportunities: 'Insurers, the pharmaceutical industry and governments are interested in the information about age- and disease-related risk, generated by LifeLines. We intend to offer them access to our data, in return for payments.' Terweij praises the ways in which money can be saved: 'Chronic diseases harm society by loss of labor, putting pressure on social security and decreased tax revenues.' He adds that LifeLines will provide hundreds of high values jobs.

In 2009, LifeLines received 40 million Euros governmental support and the province added another 13 million Euros, to be doubled by the Ministry of Economic Affairs.