

The Flemish parentage centre

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1. Reasons for the establishment of a Flemish parentage centre

Testimonies



The story of Annie:

Her child came into the world by cesarean section. She didn't wake up until weeks later. When exactly her son was born, she does not know either. She did not receive any document of his birth.

(...)

Only eighteen long years after his birth would she find him. But halfway through, she had to deal with a new trauma when she and her husband just couldn't get pregnant. At the doctor's office, she discovered why. He said, "*Girl, I'm sorry, but you won't have any more children. Your ovaries are burned.*"

Anonymous testimonies:

“They forced me to sign those papers. Those documents were written in French, I didn't even know what exactly I was signing”

“At the time of delivery, they put a mask on our faces so we couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl. I never got to hold the child. I felt so incredibly empty.”

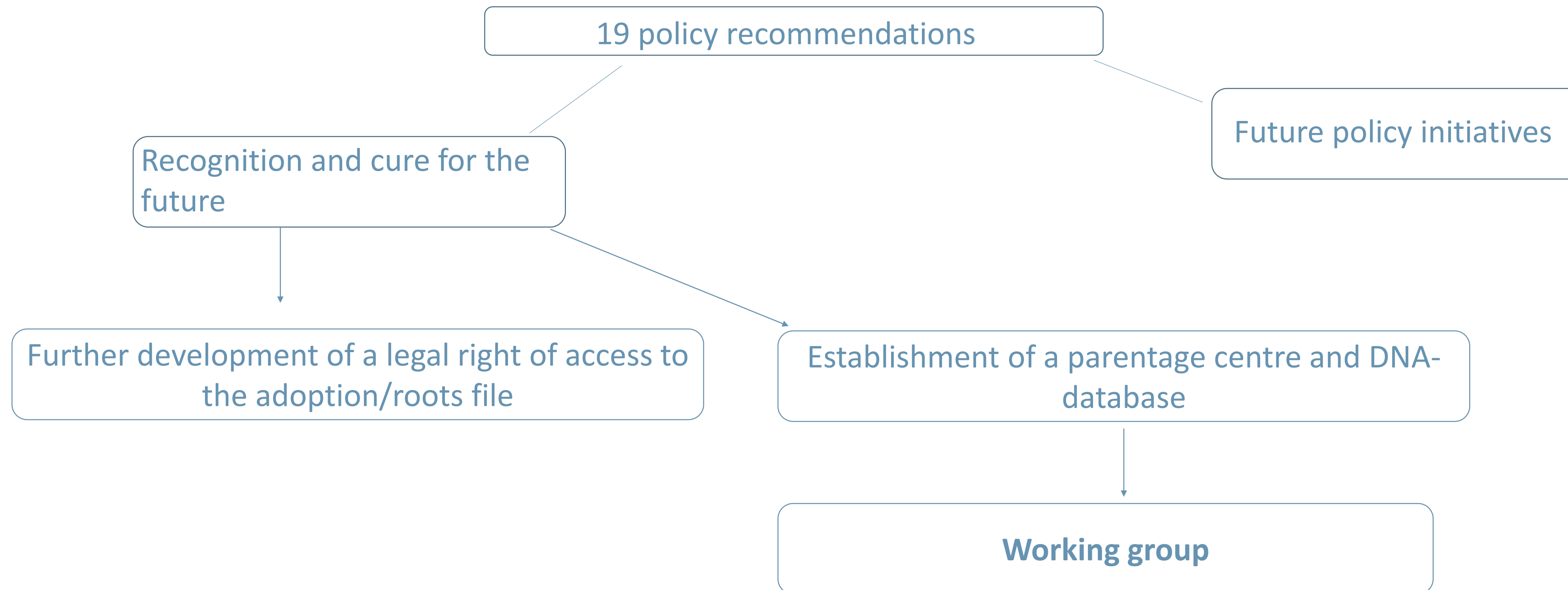
Reasons for the establishment of a Flemish parentage centre

- 2014-2015: compilation of testimonies on forced adoptions by “Mater Matuta” and release in the press
 - Events that took place between 1950 and 1990
 - Specialized homes for unmarried women
 - Social context in the 50’s – 70’s (influence of the Catholic Church)
 - Parenthood out of wedlock >< pressure on family formation within marriage
 - Lack of legal framework regarding abortion + limited access to contraception
 - Precarious legal status children born outside marriage
 - Very little control over adoption mediation
 - No anonymous or discrete childbirth in Belgium
 - Aftermath of the decolonization of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda -> Métis-children
 - Hearings in the Flemish Parliament
- ➔ Installment panel of experts

Reasons for the establishment of a Flemish parentage centre

Scope of the research by the expert panel

- Advise on ways to recognize, heal and rehabilitate the victims of forced adoptions
- Formulate policy recommendations for the future



Reasons for the establishment of a Flemish parentage centre

Composition and method working group

- Multidisciplinary composition of experts and representatives of interest groups
- Research from legal, biological and psychological perspective on the establishment of a parentage centre with a DNA-database:
 - Information gathering about similar initiatives in other countries (eg. Fiom - The Netherlands)
 - Exploration of possibilities within the Belgian legal framework

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Concept text – October 2017

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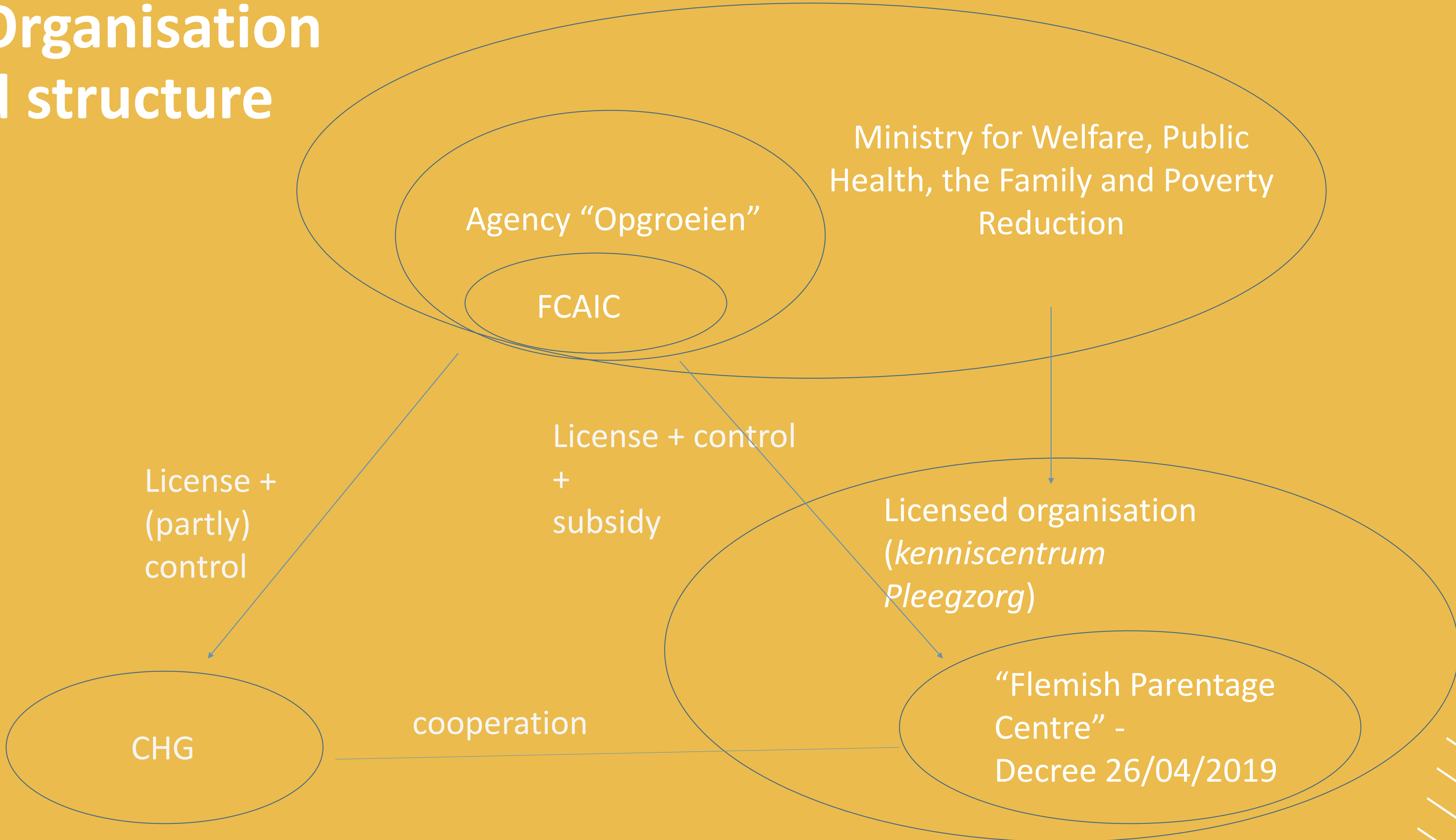
Decree 26 April 2019



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2. Organisation and structure



Organisation and structure

Licensed organisation

- Licence granted by “Opgroeien”
 - Subject to a number of conditions:
 - being part of a licensed organisation in the policy field of Welfare, Public Health, The Family and Poverty Reduction
 - having expertise in the area of parentage and adoption, or mediation and counselling in the area of family relationships
 - having a multidisciplinary team
 - having the possibility to consult experts to whom the team members can address legal or ethical questions
 - Involving various stakeholders in the development of its activities
 - ...
- granted in the summer of 2020
- subsidy EUR 300.000/year
- control/evaluation is carried out by FCAIC (opgroeien)



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Cooperation with non-profit CHG in Flanders linked to an academic hospital

- Specific license by Opgroeien:
 - create and match DNA-profiles
 - communicate with parentage centre in case of positive match
 - no subsidy

3. Flemish parentage centre

Tasks/objectives

“The parentage centre is an independent centre where anyone with questions about his or her parentage can go. The centre aims to have an integral functioning, combining research with information, guidance and sensitisation.”

- Various tasks and duties:
 - provide information and refer to specialised help if necessary:
 - free of charge
 - no obligation for disclosure of personal data
 - low-threshold
 - primarily for anyone who doubts or knows that there is no correspondence between their biological and legal parentage
 - provide guidance and assistance in the search for genetic relatives:
 - DNA samples -> DNA database
 - access to adoption records, both for the adoptee and for birth parent(s)
 - access to the files of genetic relatives – apart from an adoption context
 - mediator in contacts between genetic relatives – psychological support
 - develop expertise:
 - partnership with (international) organisations
 - collaboration/exchange with FCAIC and adoption organisations
 - awareness raising



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4. Flemish parentage centre

Target group

- Broadly defined by the Decree as “user”:

“any natural person who applies for the services of the parentage centre”

- ➔ Accessible for everyone with questions about parentage - ! legal >< biological parentage
- ➔ Collecting and matching DNA material restricted to three main groups:
 - donors and donor conceived children
 - birth parents and abandoned children
 - birth parents and adoptees
- ➔ avoid collecting DNA samples out of curiosity (e.g. family tree)

5. Flemish parentage centre

Functioning

- Step 1: contact (by any means)
 - provide information
 - Step 2: application form
 - gather information
 - (family situation)
 - Step 3: assessment application form
 - Step 4: intake
 - usefulness of collecting DNA
 - Success rate of the specific query
 - Step 5: the actual search
 - collecting DNA
 - Search for/consult (adoption) records
 - Step 6: exchange of information
 - (Step 7: intermediate)
- ➔ (Psychosocial) support in every step



6. Matching DNA

Collecting and processing DNA-samples

- exclusively for the groups defined by the Decree
- informed consent
 - processing of the sample
 - costs
 - (legal) consequences matching DNA samples
 - information sharing: (non-)identifying data
- consent = revocable
- user ≥ 12 years (< 12 years -> decision parentage centre (maturity) + consent legal representative)
- according to the specifications of the licensed CHG
 - > in the presence of a staff member of the parentage centre

Matching DNA

Collecting and processing DNA-samples

- Label on the DNA-sample
 - > unique identification number and specific marking:
 - donors and donor conceived children
 - birth parents and abandoned children
 - birth parents and adoptees
 - = three DNA-databases
 - anonymized
- DNA-profiling by CHG
 - > label with unique identification number and specific marking
 - destroyed
- Storage in one (or more) of the three DNA-databases

Matching DNA

Differentiated matching

- differentiated matching
 - = only matching DNA-profiles from the same register/DNA-database
 - > user ≠ limited to one register/DNA-database
- ➔ For privacy reasons
- matching on a regular basis
 - > Min. 30 days – Max. 90 days between two matching procedures
- ! only matching between first-degree relatives
- ↔ Consultation of adoption records up to third-degree relatives



Matching DNA

Positive match

- communication to the parentage centre by means of the identification numbers
- consultation written statement – informed consent
 - > (non-)identifying information
 - > minor: (partial) identifying information if sufficient discernment (presumed ≥ 12 years)
 - > presence of legal representative or confidant (18+)
- (psychosocial) support by the parentage centre (=> also in case of no match)
 - > facilitating contacts if preferred

7. Flemish parentage centre

Pitfalls

- Flemish initiative only
 - > less popularity
- Matching between first-degree relatives only
 - > lower success rate
- Federal principle of donor anonymity
 - > voluntary participation
- Matching DNA ≠ free of charge
 - > financial treshold

Questions?



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