



Genetic Testing Can Benefit Human Health. Emily C. Dossett.
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Genetic Testing Can Benefit Human Health

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From "God Is in the D(NA)-tails," by Emily C. Dossett, *Sojourners*, July/August 2001. Copyright © 2000 by SojoNet. Reprinted with permission.

In the following viewpoint, Emily C. Dossett contends that genetic testing, the ability to determine if an individual has a genetic predisposition to an illness, can benefit human health. She argues that although there are dangers inherent in genetic testing, such screening can influence people to take control of their own health. Dossett is a medical student in California and a regular contributor to *Sojourners*, a magazine that advocates Christian views on current issues.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Dossett, which gene is attributed to Huntington's disease?
2. What is Dossett's view of the accessibility of genetic information?
3. According to the author, why is no single person "genetically ideal"?

Everything our bodies need to become whole, healthy, and unique arise from the grand plan contained within one molecule: DNA. The elegance, beauty, and power of God can be seen in the intricacies of human genetics.

Yet not everyone's DNA is perfect—in fact, we all have flaws. Some flaws are not that serious—we may be bowlegged, or gain weight too easily for our liking. But other problems are more profound. Take, for instance, Huntington's Disease. It's caused by a change in the huntingtin gene that one inherits from a parent. Symptoms include a writhing and twisting of the arms, followed by dementia and inevitable death. The disease is not pretty, and there is no treatment.

This is where the dilemmas start. When genetic disorders arise, how far can we go in order to fix them? If we see God in DNA, is it sacred territory? Or are we allowed to approach, to investigate, and to make changes? These are not rhetorical questions. The entire human genome—every bit of DNA—has been mapped out by the Human Genome Project. It's no longer science fiction to use genes to "grow" new organs for transplant, to design medicine that's specific for each individual, or to replace bad genes with new, good ones. Of immediate concern is genetic testing—the ability to determine if a person has genes that will increase or guarantee their risk of disease.

Genetic testing holds so much potential for good—and, of course, for bad. A child who has a parent with Huntington's Disease, for example, can be tested to see if he or she has the damaged gene—but *there is no treatment*. All the test yields is the certainty of a horrible, slowly progressing illness that kills at an early age. If there is no treatment, is making such a diagnosis really using the power of genetics to heal?

Not an Unequivocal Evil

Yet genetic testing cannot be written off as an unequivocal evil. For some, there may be comfort in knowledge of what the future holds. And just because we have no treatment for a disease at this time does not mean that we never will. If we were able to use our knowledge of the huntingtin gene to create medicines for those who need it, many lives would be saved. Every condition known, from

diabetes to heart disease to obesity, has at least some genetic component. Many of these conditions can be altered with diet and exercise, and genetic testing may encourage people to take more control of their health. The healing potential of genetic testing and treatment could affect literally every symptom we experience.

Genetic differences are even more fundamental than the color of our skin, our gender, or where we live, and testing for them could lead to serious discrimination. The results of genetic tests become part of our medical records. Contrary to what we'd like to believe, these records are not really confidential at all, especially with the advent of Web-based medical records; everyone from your insurance agent to your boss can find a way to access them. A person who discovers that he or she has a damaged huntingtin gene could very likely have difficulty finding a job or getting health insurance.

There is a positive side here as well. Every single one of us has genetic mutations—some good, some bad—and there is no single person who is "genetically ideal." One genetic ethicist has predicted that discovery of more and more genetic mutations will naturally lead to national health insurance, since insurance companies will have no one left without a "pre-existing condition" that they are able to cover.

No "Better-than-Thou"

Perhaps the knowledge that there is no "better-than-thou" in genetics will help us realize that we are all equal in the eyes of God and, who knows, maybe some day in each other's eyes as well. God saw infinite possibilities for beauty through one simple molecule, and we are the product of that plan. It is not for us to judge which are more beautiful and to discard the rest, but to appreciate life in all its forms.

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