

GIG Welcomes Genome Announcement (26 June 2000)

Today's announcements of the completion of first drafts of the human genome marks a milestone in genetic research, not to say human endeavour, with implications across the field. Among other things it will contribute towards improved diagnosis and treatment for individuals suffering from everything from the rarest of single gene disorders to the cancers and heart conditions. It will also offer new insights into normal and abnormal biological functioning. At some point in the future, new methods of treatment—from gene therapy to cell replacement therapies and individually tailored drugs will come in part from the sequencing of the human genome.

It is not entirely a matter of what will happen in the future. Some of the benefits of genetic research are already being felt. But in many aspects this is a beginning, and much remains to be done. Estimates vary of the length of time that may elapse before we see new therapies coming into clinical use on a widespread scale. There are many hurdles still to overcome, both scientific and non-scientific. GIG is particularly concerned to ensure that the rarer single gene disorders are not lost sight of as the focus inevitably falls on the common disorders which afflict the populations of the Western world. Ensuring that the Health Service is geared up to maximising the benefits of the science will also be a key priority. Ethical concerns, both real and imagined will have to be dealt with.

Above all we will need to have the courage of our convictions to deal with the inevitable difficulties that will confront us in the new century of biology. It seems appropriate, in looking forward to the next phase in the study and application of human genetics, to recall the recent comment of James Watson, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA: 'moving forward will not be for the faint of heart. But if the next century witnesses failure, let it be because our science is not yet up to the job, not because we don't have the courage to make less random the sometimes most unfair courses of human evolution.' That is our hope too.