



Bioethics Responder *from The Hastings Center*

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Pending Approval of the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA) is Promising, but Addresses Only Part of a Larger Problem, says Hastings Centre President

Americans remain vulnerable to discrimination based on many other disease risks

GARRISON, NY - Thomas Murray, president of The Hastings Center, welcomes the imminently pending Senate vote on the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA), which would help protect Americans from discrimination based on their genetic profiles. The bill passed by a wide margin in the House of Representatives in April 2007.

"The 1993 report on Genetic Information and Health Insurance by a task force of the National Human Genome Research Institute demonstrated the unfairness of denying people health insurance for conditions that they are most at risk of developing," said Murray. "With the passage of GINA, one source of that unfairness—genetic susceptibility to diseases—is being addressed."

However, Murray added, Americans would remain vulnerable to discrimination based on many other disease risks, such as a history of cancer, along with all symptomatic diseases. "This discrimination needs to be dealt with by comprehensive health care reform," he said.

The mapping of the human genome has led to the discovery of a rapidly growing list of genes associated with a wide variety of diseases, including type 2 diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, and many forms of cancer. Genetic testing holds the promise of improved treatment or prevention of many diseases. But there is concern about guarding the privacy of people's genetic information and avoiding genetic discrimination from insurers and employers.

Even as the Senate prepares to vote on GINA, a new breed of companies is offering commercial genetic tests directly to the public, among the most recent being Navigenics, a firm that recently opened a temporary store in Manhattan's chic Soho neighborhood. From a DNA sample, these companies promise information on disease risk, ancestry, or both.

Murray advised caution in the rush to embrace commercial genetic testing. "Perhaps the greatest risk from what people are calling "recreational genomics" is not from discrimination," he said, "but rather from an overzealous belief in the power of genetic prophecy."