

Genetics to Genomics in Clinical Medicine

ABSTRACT

Biomedical research and knowledge has grown exponentially since the completion of the Human Genome Project in the year 2000. There has been a gradual shift from ‘genetics’ (study of genes) to ‘genomics’ (study of the whole genome) in medicine. Advances such as sequencing of the human genome, genome enrichment, epigenetics and bioinformatics have transformed the face of translational research and are beginning to have a major impact on clinical practice. In order to take advantage of the full potential of genomic research in clinical practice, clinicians will need to understand and embrace a significant conceptual shift from ‘Mendelian genetics’ to ‘Post Mendelian genomics’.

A relative lack of genetics to genomics knowledge has been reported amongst senior physicians in major health plans in the United States ^[1]. This is also true of physicians practicing in the United Kingdom as reflected in the reports by the British Royal Society (BRS), Wellcome Trust and UK department of Health ^[2,3]. While large sections of the academic medical community is driving this conceptual shift, a significant proportion of practicing clinicians are not actively involved in these developments. Here we describe the continuum from genetics to genomics in medicine by giving a brief overview of the shift from single gene disorders and chromosomal aberrations to functional genomics and our current understanding of the more dynamic relationship between genotype and phenotype.

Keywords: clinical medicine, genetics, genomics, genotype, phenotype, translational research

1. INTRODUCTION

It is essential that advances in basic science ultimately translate into benefit to our patients and one prerequisite for this to happen is an understanding of the fundamentals of innovation by clinicians.

Many practicing clinicians will have last learned about the genetic basis of disease during their university days. However, over the last 20 years our understanding of the relationship between genetic information and phenotype has evolved significantly. The study of the genetic basis of health and disease is one of the most active and promising areas of basic science research. It also holds great potential to bring new diagnostic and therapeutic modalities to the bedside. Therefore, clinicians need to have an understanding of the techniques involved, their potential and limitations. However, the investigations into the human genome and its role in disease are evolving at an astonishing pace and it is increasingly difficult for a practicing clinician to keep abreast with these developments. While large sections of the academic medical community is driving the conceptual shift in genetics, a significant proportion of the practicing clinicians have not yet familiarised themselves with

33 these developments. Whilst it is not necessary or expected for a non-academic physician to
34 follow the cutting edge of genome related research, certain milestones have been reached
35 which the forward-thinking clinician may wish to understand. For these advances to translate
36 into patient benefit it is essential that there is active communication between researchers
37 and clinicians, with a mutual understanding of each other's language, challenges and
38 achievements.

39
40 We now understand that the fairly mechanistic and rigid model of strictly mendelian genetics,
41 which has led to the discovery of some ground-breaking links between genotype and
42 phenotype is too limited a concept for the vast majority of pathology, or indeed variations in
43 health and performance.

44
45 The human genome is a complex macromolecule comprised of 3.2 billion repeating
46 nucleotides of adenine (A), cytosine (C), guanine (G), and thymine (T). The primary base
47 sequence is not the sole explanation for the complex way that genetics governs our
48 biological function. For example the presence of a gene (a series of nucleotides that form a
49 genetic code) does not automatically imply that it is being read and expressed to produce a
50 complementary RNA copy of the DNA sequence (transcription) or that this is then used to
51 generate proteins (translation) and there are a number of genetic and environmental factors
52 that govern this process. Therefore genetics, the study of inherited traits or phenotypes with
53 the basic unit of inheritance being the gene, contrasts with genomics, which refers to the
54 study of functions and interactions of all genes in a genome. This includes the entirety of
55 inherited DNA sequences and a recognition that information in one region (or locus) of the
56 genome is modified by information at many other loci and by non-genetic factors. Functional
57 genomics also includes the study of the dynamic changes in gene products (transcripts,
58 proteins, metabolites) and how these changes mediate normal and abnormal biological
59 function. The term 'Omics' encompasses comprehensive methodologies that attempt to
60 capture the exhaustive output of an organism's genes (genomics), RNA (transcriptomics),
61 proteins (proteomics) and metabolites (metabolomics). The systems biology approach allows
62 the study of networks of interactions, in addition to dissecting the role of individual molecular
63 components ^[4].

64 65 **2. MENDELIAN GENETICS**

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67 Traditionally, genetic disorders were considered to be caused by defects in the DNA
68 sequence of single genes that are transmitted in Mendelian fashion to the offspring (Figure
69 1).

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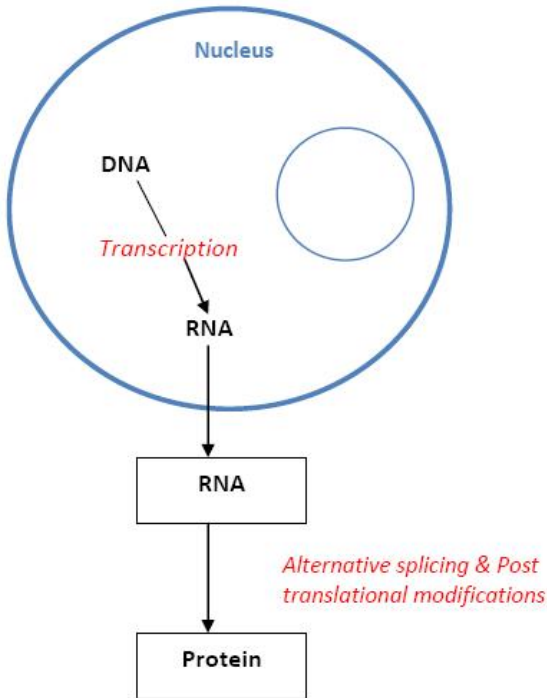


Figure 1: Central Dogma (DNA → RNA → Protein)

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78 Such mutations are responsible for over 6000 human diseases e.g. cystic fibrosis, sickle cell
79 anaemia, marfan's syndrome, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy and other pathologies. With a
80 prevalence of 1.4%, they account for considerable morbidity and mortality.

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82 Understanding genetic transmission of Mendelian disorders plays a critical role in diagnosing
83 and managing diseases. For example, an individual with a family history of an autosomal
84 dominant disorder can have an increased likelihood of disease from [1 in 500–5000] in the
85 general population to [1 in 2] in some cases and hence warrants a different approach to
86 assessment in comparison to an individual with sporadic disease^[5].

87

88 Genetic testing is available for many single gene disorders and timely preventive treatment
89 can be offered if diagnosed at an early age (newborn screening using CFTR-mutation testing
90 has improved management of cystic fibrosis).

91

92 These discoveries have had a major clinical impact with gene therapy emerging as a
93 successful treatment option for some single gene disorders. While this genetic approach has
94 been successful in various infectious diseases as well (tuberculosis, malaria), it is currently
95 not replicable in other more complex disorders including asthma and sepsis. Nevertheless,
96 the recent national research fund of £3.1 million awarded to the UK CF Gene therapy
97 consortium reflects the great potential this field holds.

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100 **3. CHROMOSOMAL ABNORMALITIES**

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102 Mendelian genetics gave rise to cytogenetics, studying heredity and variation. Various
103 methods were developed to visualise chromosome structure and organisation in order to
104 determine genotype-phenotype relationships. Early studies identified associations between
105 syndromic phenotypes and chromosome number abnormalities e.g. Downs, Turners and
106 Klinefelter's syndromes.

107

108 A major turning point was the discovery of the first chromosomal structural abnormality
109 associated with chronic myeloid leukaemia in 1960^[6]. Using this information the drug
110 Imatinib was developed (2002), which revolutionised cancer treatment. Cytogenetics has
111 also improved our understanding of Acute Myelogenous Leukemia, Prader-Willi and
112 Angelman syndromes and has led to the identification of *PIK3CA* oncogene associated with
113 ovarian cancer ^[7].

114

115 Cytogenetics entered routine clinical practice in pre-implantation and diagnostics in
116 congenital abnormalities as well as degenerative diseases. Not only did cytogenetic
117 approaches discover associations between human disease and chromosomal abnormalities,
118 it lead to mapping of genes to specific chromosomes. Mapping of Duffy blood group locus to
119 chromosome 1 is a fine example ^[7].

120

121 Various techniques are employed in the study of cytogenetics, including routine analysis of
122 geimsa stained chromosomes, banding techniques, molecular analysis such as fluorescent
123 in situ hybridisation (FISH), spectral karyotyping and comparative genomic hybridisation.

124

125 These are described online.

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127 *{Further reading: Cytogenetics (WEB1)}*

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131 **4. POLYGENIC DISORDERS**

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133 Genetic disorders can be complex and caused by an interplay of genetic variants with
134 environmental factors. Their pattern of inheritance is not clear-cut. Non-oncological
135 examples include asthma, diabetes, obesity and heart disease.

136

137 Genetic insights have brought major advances in the field of cancer. An example of impact
138 on patient care is the concept of preventive mastectomies for women with high-risk
139 mutations in BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes.

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141 **5. GENOME WIDE ASSOCIATION STUDIES (GWAS)**

142

143 While changes in a single DNA sequence imparting a large determinative effect can explain
144 single gene disorders, this does not always hold true in complex phenotypes. Complex
145 diseases result from the cumulative and interactive effects of a large number of gene regions
146 (loci), each imparting a modest marginal effect on phenotypic expression ^[8]. This principle,
147 commonly known as common disease-common variant hypothesis, suggests that a profile or
148 pattern of multiple common alleles (one of two or more forms of a gene) contributes to the
149 risk of developing common diseases. This underpins genome wide association studies
150 (GWAS).

151

152 GWAS aim to find genetic variants associated with a particular disease by scanning markers
153 across DNA sets of a species. GWAS search the genome for small variations called Single
154 Nucleotide Polymorphisms (SNP, often called 'Snips'), which occur more frequently in
155 people with a particular disease than in people without it. A SNP is a DNA sequence
156 variation occurring when a single nucleotide (A,T,C or G) in the genome differs between
157 members of a biological species or paired chromosomes in an individual. So the unit of
158 genetic information examined is far smaller—a single nucleotide, rather than a sequence, but
159 the investigation is designed to look at whole profiles of small genetic variations across many
160 sites. GWAS might lead to examining the complete genomic sequence of individuals to
161 identify all genetic variations, but currently we rely on the principle of linkage disequilibrium
162 (LD) to identify a set of common variants that are statistical proxies for genetic variation at a
163 particular frequency. LD describes the non-random association between two alleles at
164 different locations.

165
166 {Further reading: GWAS (WEB2)}

167
168 The shift of research focus from Mendelian disorders to the current emphasis on GWAS was
169 enabled by the completion of the Human genome project in the year 2000, public availability
170 of vast amounts of detailed sequence information and development of high throughput
171 genetic technologies. Advances in information technology are fundamental in harnessing this
172 wealth of data ^[8].

173
174 GWAS have lead to a better understanding of the genetic basis of complex diseases in
175 which the patients' risk is determined by a combination of many genetic variations e.g.
176 coronary artery disease, hypertension, stroke susceptibility ^[9,10]. One of the most significant
177 clinical impacts of GWAS have been their contribution to pharmacogenomics (effect of
178 genetic variations on response to medication). In cardiovascular medicine, recognizing that
179 25% of patients have a sub-therapeutic antiplatelet response to clopidogrel, researchers
180 have identified several genetic variants affecting the metabolism of clopidogrel, a prodrug, to
181 its active metabolite. Of these, the CYP2C19 variant allele has been best linked to impaired
182 clopidogrel metabolism, reduced platelet inhibition, and a higher risk of adverse
183 cardiovascular events after percutaneous coronary interventions. Because of the cumulative
184 data, the Food and Drug Administration has now altered the prescribing information for
185 clopidogrel based on CYP2C19 genotype, a move that foreshadows the development of
186 companion diagnostic testing and alternative inhibitors of ADP-mediated platelet activation
187 that do not require metabolism by CYP2C19. Genotype guided clopidogrel prescription is a
188 major advancement in the field of genomics ^[11].

189
190 By their very nature, GWAS focus on a small percentage of the total genome and explain a
191 small proportion of heritability given the low odd ratios. Hence there is an increased risk of
192 missing rare variants, irrespective of whether these are in coding or non-coding regions.
193 Capturing all possible variation within a sample requires a sequencing strategy.

194 195 **6. GENE SEQUENCING**

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197 Gene sequencing is the determination of the precise sequence of nucleotides in a DNA
198 sample. Sequencing of the human genome, however, has been a daunting task, at least until
199 the very recent years. The Human Genome Project, which was launched in 1990 with the
200 primary goal of deciphering the sequence of the human genome, took more than a decade
201 to complete, even in a draft form, and cost nearly \$3 billion. DNA sequencing technology,
202 however, has undergone a colossal evolution since the beginning of the Sanger method in
203 1980. New techniques that sequence millions of DNA strands in parallel have been
204 developed. The new technologies, which are collectively referred to as *next generation*

205 *sequencing (NGS)* platforms have increased DNA sequencing output and reduced the cost
206 of DNA sequencing by 500,000-fold ^[12]. Recent advances in technology (3rd generation
207 sequencers), may well deliver on the promise to provide the ‘1000 Dollar Genome’: the
208 ability to sequence the whole human genome for \$1000.

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210 {Further reading: *Sequencing (WEB3)*}

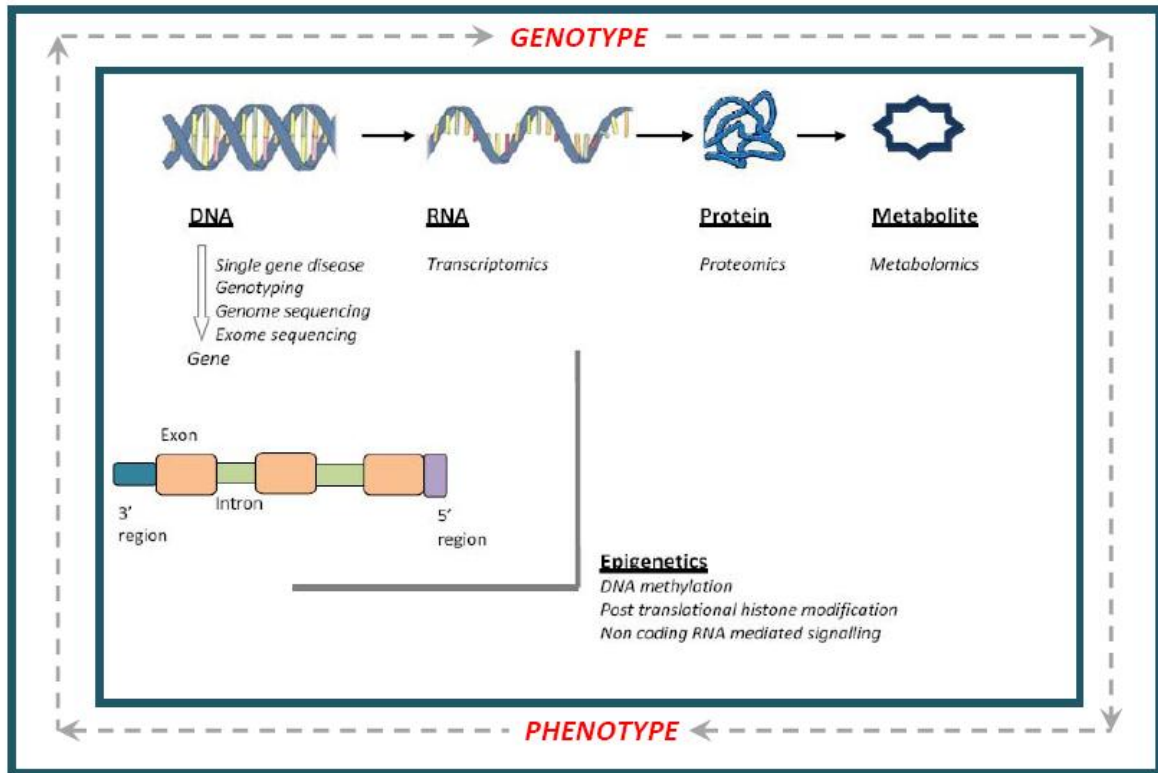
211
212 These advances in GWAS and sequencing could have a substantial impact on medical care.
213 The results of the Encode project demonstrated multiple regulatory functions of so-called
214 ‘junk’ DNA and its potential role in understanding conditions like diabetes and heart disease.
215 These effects of non-coding RNA, for example, might explain GWAS hits in gene deserts.
216 (Glossary) The vision is for increasingly personalised medicine, whereby healthcare
217 interventions (treatment and prevention programs) would be based on individuals’ genomic
218 make up. An example includes the use of genomic information in the risk prediction models
219 of coronary disease ^[13-15]. Genotype based risk prediction is fixed from birth, allows early risk
220 prediction, is less susceptible to biological variation over life, is easy to obtain with minimal
221 measurement error.

222 223 **7. EPIGENETICS AND THE ‘OMICS’ ERA**

224
225 Although DNA sequence variation plays a major role in determining phenotype and
226 ‘DNA→RNA→Protein’ remains the central dogma in the ‘omics’ era, discoveries in genome
227 science have revealed more complex interactions that determine clinical phenotype.

228
229 *Functional genomics* investigates dynamic changes in genes and gene products (transcripts,
230 proteins, metabolites). *Epigenetics* identifies mechanisms independent of nucleotide
231 sequence—such as DNA methylation, histone deacetylation or RNA epigenetics. Figure 2
232 depicts the dynamic genotype-phenotype relationship.

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Figure 2: Genotype-Phenotype dynamics

Various 'omics' terms are used to categorize concepts that interrogate these dynamic interactions. These are:

7.1 Transcriptomics

The mere presence of a gene does not mean that it is being read and expressed to produce a complementary RNA copy of the DNA sequence (transcription) or that this is then used to generate proteins (translation). Despite the identical genome, there is tremendous variability in gene expression in different tissues in response to environmental stimuli. This variation may play a significant role in governing health and disease.

Transcriptomics helps understand the link between the genetic code and molecules governing cell function by studying the RNA transcripts produced by the genome (transcriptome).

Over the last decade transcriptomics (microarray technology) has contributed enormously to our understanding of the molecular basis of cancer. It is now possible to develop potential biomarkers that could be useful in diagnosis and prognosis and would also help achieve the goal of individualized cancer treatment. This technology has also been successful in research into infectious diseases like tuberculosis. Microarray studies have led to the identification of biomarkers differentiating active and latent TB and have also evaluated mechanisms underlying variability in efficacy of BCG vaccination globally along-with development of chemo/immune therapy^[16].

264
265 Transcriptomic studies are accomplished by using gene expression microarrays, RNA
266 sequencing or mRNA FISH to quantify the abundance of all transcripts expressed in a tissue
267 of interest under a given biological state ^[4]. The resulting data contain a large amount of
268 information regarding genes that are turned on or off in the setting of a disease. This
269 information can be used to identify individual genes of interest or gene panels that change
270 together.

271
272 Transcriptome databases have been created by the National Human Genome Research
273 Institute (NHGRI) – Mammalian Gene Collection (mgc.nci.nih.gov) and Mouse
274 Transcriptome Project (ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).

275 276 **7.2 Epigenetics**

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278 Studies changes in gene function that occur without a change in DNA sequence. It refers to
279 the functionally relevant modifications to the genome that do not involve a change in the
280 nucleotide sequence. Epigenetic mechanisms explain the ability of certain chemicals to
281 initiate biological perturbations that can lead to malignancy and have also established a
282 causal link between certain infectious diseases and cancer ^[17]. The key feature that
283 distinguishes epigenetic modifications from genetic changes is their reversible nature.
284 Epigenetic modifications include DNA methylation, post-translational histone modifications
285 and non-coding RNA mediated signaling pathways.

286
287 *{Further reading: Epigenetics (WEB4)}*

288
289 DNA methylation measurement techniques include measurement of global methylation
290 content (amount of methylation in test DNA regardless of position), gene specific analysis
291 and high coverage methods including genome wide scans and arrays. The global
292 methylation content can be analysed by direct measurement of methyl group content by
293 using high performance liquid chromatography, immuno-staining or digestion with
294 methylation sensitive enzymes. Methylation can also be estimated in repeated elements
295 based on pyrosequencing and methylight. Gene specific analysis can be done by
296 pyrosequencing (highly quantitative with single site resolution), methylation specific PCR
297 (qualitative with no single site resolution, more economical), real time PCR (low resolution
298 but very economical). Genome wide scans include microarrays and next generation
299 sequencing.

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301 The histone modification analysis involves initial purification and isolation of histones. This is
302 followed by histone detection by ELISA (Enzyme linked Immunosorbent Assay) or ChIP
303 (Chromatin Immunoprecipitation). ELISA provides a global genomic content of a certain
304 modification whereas ChIP qPCR is a gene specific measure of a certain modification next
305 to a specific gene. The non-coding RNA analysis techniques include candidate miRNA
306 analysis by real time PCR, microarrays, counter Nanostring analysis and deep sequencing.

307 308 309 **7.3 Proteomics**

310
311 Studies the entire protein complement of a cell. Most RNA transcripts are translated into
312 proteins that exert physiological or pathological effects. The proteome consists of all proteins
313 present in a cell at a given time and is far more complex than was originally proposed by the
314 one-gene, one-transcript, one-protein hypothesis ^[18]. To date, it is estimated that the
315 approximately 24,000 human genes encode for nearly one million proteins ^[18]. Alternative

316 splicing, by which a single gene can produce multiple versions of a protein, is a significant
317 contributor to protein diversity, occurring in 35% to 60% of our genes ^[19].

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319 *{Further reading: Alternative Splicing (WEB5)}*

320

321 Proteins have a functional role in phenotype determination, reflecting genetic constitution
322 along-with environmental effects. This response to external stimuli is detected in the
323 proteome. Measurable changes in protein profiles are being used to assess disease. In the
324 differential diagnosis of benign versus malignant prostatic disease a difference in proteomic
325 profiles is robust enough to be used as a predictive diagnostic tool ^[20].

326

327 *{Further reading: Proteomics (WEB6)}*

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329

330 **7.4 Metabolomics**

331

332 Is the study of metabolites in a given biological state resulting from a complex interplay
333 between gene expression, protein product and environmental factors. The functional state of
334 an individual at a particular time-point and in response to specific drugs/environmental
335 stimuli is represented by the metabolome.

336

337 Metabolomic studies can lead to a better understanding of disease mechanisms, new
338 diagnostic markers and individual variation to drug response. Initial metabolomic signatures
339 have already been reported for several conditions, including Alzheimer's, coronary disease
340 and ovarian/breast cancer. These signatures are made up of metabolites that are de-
341 regulated, with modified concentrations in the disease state or after drug exposure. As a
342 result, analysis of these signatures and their components can show mechanisms of disease
343 pathophysiology ^[21].

344

345 The various molecules studied in metabolomics can be analysed by using a combination of
346 separation and detection techniques based on individual properties of the molecule being
347 studied.

348

349 *{Further reading: Metabolomic techniques (WEB7)}*

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351 The development of these analytical platforms that are capable of accurately measuring
352 hundreds or thousands of small molecules in biological samples promise to substantially
353 advance our understanding of disease pathophysiology and development of disease risk
354 biomarkers ^[21].

355 **8. BIONFORMATICS AND SYSTEM GENETICS**

356 Vast quantities of data are generated by genomic research. A biological database is a large
357 organised body of data usually associated with computerised software designed to update,
358 query and retrieve components of the data stored within the system. For researchers to
359 benefit from stored data, easy access to information and a method to extract only the
360 information required to answer a specific biological question are essential.

361 The need to utilize this new information in context of the existing genetic data has lead to the
362 development of a new set of tools. Bioinformatics uses computer sciences to integrate large
363 data sets and to answer biological questions. Interestingly, many of the concepts of
364 bioinformatics were developed well before the human genome project, but functional
365 genomics technologies, the internet, and a culture of data sharing have propelled the field,

366 which now touches nearly all domains of biomedical research. A major bioinformatics
367 initiative to standardize the representation of gene and gene products across species and
368 databases has led to the development of the Gene Ontology Project
369 (www.geneontology.org). It provides a controlled vocabulary of terms for describing gene
370 product characteristics and gene product annotation data as well tools to access and
371 process data. The use of computational approaches in bioinformatics provides a global
372 perspective in experimental design and helps to capitalize on the emerging technology of
373 database mining^[22].

374 Data mining (referencing data from different sources and summarising it into useful
375 information) and common bioinformatics tools have for example been used for the selection
376 of highly specific DNA probes, eliminating the need of traditional methods which are costly
377 and time consuming. Bioinformatic tools allow performing many investigations into the
378 genome 'in silico' as opposed to time and cost consuming wet lab work 'in-vitro'^[23].

379 *{Further reading: Bioinformatics and Systems Biology (WEB8)}*

380 Systems genetics seeks to understand the complexity of phenotypic variation resulting from
381 multiple complex interactions between genetic and environmental factors. The defining
382 principle of systems genetics is understanding how genetic information is integrated and
383 ultimately transmitted through molecular, cellular, and physiological networks to enable
384 higher-order functions and emergent properties of biological systems^[24]. Although the goal
385 of understanding how genetic and phenotypic variants interact to create the functional
386 diversity of organismal biology has not changed since Mendel, the experimental and
387 computational methods of systems genetics will finally enable us to study previously
388 intractable problems.

389 **9. CONCLUSION**

390 Biomedical research has grown exponentially in the last 20 years and remarkable advances
391 have been achieved. However, we have been unable to translate the full potential of
392 genomic research to clinical medicine due in part to a relative lack of education about
393 genetics and genomics amongst the general non-academic physicians. Advances in genetic
394 knowledge and an insight into genetic variation in human populations, manifested as disease
395 risk through various genetic, epigenetic and environmental interactions, need to become
396 commonplace in clinical practice. Genomics, in clinical practice, can lead to development of
397 new targets for treatment and prevention of disease as well as realise the goal of
398 personalised medicine. Efficient use and regulation of the vast amounts of information
399 generated for the benefit of patients requires the physicians, geneticists and biomedical
400 researchers to work closely together and to have a mutual understanding of the challenges
401 and opportunities.

402
403 *{Further reading: Glossary (WEB9)}*

404
405 *{Further reading: Online Figures (WEB10)}*

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409 **COMPETING INTERESTS**

410

411 Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

412

413 **CONSENT**

414

415 Not applicable

416

417

418 **ETHICAL APPROVAL**

419

420 Not applicable

421

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514	APPENDIX
515	(ONLINE MATERIAL)
516	
517	WEB1: Cytogenetics
518	
519	WEB2: Genome Wide Association Studies
520	
521	WEB3: Gene Sequencing
522	
523	WEB4: Epigenetics
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525	WEB5: Alternative Splicing
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529	WEB7: Metabolomic Techniques
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537	Online References
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