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## Developing Up Close and Personal Medical Treatments

*Two institutions seek to take genetic research to a new level*

By Shankar P.

3/31/2008



Simon Samaha, left, and Michael Christman, have teamed up on a novel project to personalize health care. [Steven J. Dundas/NJBIZ]

CAMDEN—The Coriell Institute of Medical Research and Cooper University Hospital have launched a unique research project that aims to help physicians and pharmaceutical companies design treatments tailored to individual genetic traits.

Called the Delaware Valley Personalized Medicine Project, the research will analyze saliva samples from 10,000 patients over three years to identify their predisposition to ailments that include cancer, heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Coriell, a Camden-based nonprofit biomedical research firm, maintains the world's largest bank of human biological specimens such as blood and tissue. Cooper University Hospital is part of the Cooper Health System that serves South Jersey and the Delaware Valley, and is the clinical campus for Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in Camden.

Cooper, together with the Fox Chase Cancer Center in Philadelphia and Virtua Health of Marlton, would each provide 2,000 samples for the study. The remainder would come from patients across South Jersey, says Michael Christman, Coriell's president and CEO, whose goal is to collect samples from 100,000 patients.

The benefits to the pharmaceutical industry are obvious, says Jay Tischfield, chair of the department of genetics and director of the Human Genetics Institute at Rutgers University in Piscataway. "If [drug makers] can select a population where they believe a drug will be effective, they can take a shortcut to approval," he says.

"It all depends on the disease," Tischfield adds. "If you have a drug that treats 20 percent of diabetes patients or 20 percent of hypertension patients, it would be incredible, because the [patient] populations are so large."

Coriell has so far secured commitments totaling \$5 million from four foundations and its own endowment to fund the research. Christman expects the project to cost from \$20 million to \$25 million over the next three-to-five year, and expects to add 20 people to Coriell's current work force of about 140 employees.

Christman says the project will provide patients with portions of the findings to share with doctors, who could use the results to treat the patients. He says Coriell would provide such information for free, whereas for-profit, genome-profiling companies charge between \$1,000 and \$2,500 per patient.

New Jersey is "the perfect" place for this project, says Christman, "because it has the best genetic privacy laws in the country." It is illegal for insurance companies or employers to discriminate on the basis of genetic information, he says.

Simon Samaha, chief medical officer at Cooper, says the hospital will monitor the progress of patients receiving genome-informed treatment and share it with Coriell. He says Cooper is in the process of identifying who among its 400 full-time physicians needs additional training for the project.

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Cooper's 2,000 samples would come from the hospital's own employees. "These are the people where the rubber meets the road in terms of health care," he says. "They are out there in the front line and they are the ones who need to understand the coming impact of genome-informed medicine."

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Samaha says the samples his hospital collects will be "anonymized and blinded, where nobody except the patients themselves can access the information." They will be stored with "state-of-the-art security with multiple codes," adds Christman.

Coriell is building an electronic portal to enable patients to view their information. "By August," says Christman, "you are likely to see some participants log on to the Web site, see information about their own genomes, and be able to grant access to their physicians."

Rutgers' Tischfield says the project could take genetic research to a new level. "The genetic information we now have has limited predictive value," he says. "If we can find out what the genetic difference is that makes us susceptible or not susceptible to certain drugs, it could cut down the number of [doctor] visits and trials and errors."

Christman says Coriell has talked with pharmaceutical companies about participating in the project. "Nothing is established so far, but we are optimistic," he says of possible partnerships. "Pharmaceutical companies don't quite know what to make of these technologies, and are not sure what the policy implications will be for them," he says. "But they are going to have to implement genetic profiling in all clinical trials before long."

The Food and Drug Administration "has made it clear" that genetic profiling is the way to go for the pharmaceutical industry, adds Christman, and Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt "has made personalized medicine one of his top 10 priorities."

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