

UC Berkeley plan to test freshmen DNA criticized

May 21 2010, By MARCUS WOHLSEN , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- A plan by the University of California, Berkeley to voluntarily test the DNA of incoming freshman has come under fire from critics who said the school was pushing an unproven technology on impressionable students.

The university has said it will send test kits to 5,500 new students to analyze genes that help control the body's responses to alcohol, dairy products and folic acid.

The voluntary tests are intended to spur conversation about the growing field of personal genomics, not predict the likelihood of disease, university officials said Thursday.

"We thought that this would be a more engaging vehicle for discussion than having them read a book or an article," said Mark Schlissel, dean of biology at UC Berkeley.

Critics, however, worry that students could get the idea the school approves of widely available direct-to-consumer gene-testing kits that claim to predict the risk of future health problems, said Jesse Reynolds, a policy analyst at the Center for Genetics and Society, a [bioethics](#) think thank.

Students might think, "Berkeley gave it to us. It must be good. UC Berkeley would never be giving its incoming students anything bad or controversial," Reynolds said.

One such kit was set to go on sale at Walgreen's pharmacies last week. However, the chain changed its mind after federal regulators said the kit's manufacturer never submitted the product to the [Food and Drug Administration](#) for review, a requirement for medical devices.

University officials said they were careful to choose genes for testing that were not related to serious health issues.

"We wanted to pick genes in which the variants were very easy to understand, not threatening, and probably reveal information students have about themselves already," said Jasper Rine, a [UC Berkeley](#) genetics professor who is spearheading the testing program.

The program's organizers said it was important to get students talking about the issues because genetic testing would likely become an everyday part of medicine in coming decades.

A key concern about many direct-to-consumer genetic tests is their reliance on studies that use statistics to determine how likely a particular gene variation is to be connected to a specific disease.

Many such studies are preliminary, but public health officials worry that without proper counseling, consumers are likely to take their test results as definitive.

Schlissel said the science behind the tests being given to students was well-grounded in years of research. In addition, students arriving in the fall will be able to attend a presentation of the overall results for the entire incoming class and learn what the results mean.

All DNA will be collected privately, officials said. Students will use a barcode that only they have to locate their individual results, and the university said all DNA will be incinerated after the analysis is

completed.

Students also will be able to compete to win one of four much more comprehensive personal gene scans from 23andMe Inc., a Google-backed company that has been at the center of the debate over direct-to-consumer [genetic testing](#).

Dr. Muin J. Khoury, director of the National Office of Public Health Genomics at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said the value of the tests to students will depend on how well the results are presented and discussed.

The test for a gene related to how quickly a person absorbs alcohol could easily lead new college [students](#) to get the wrong idea, he said.

"I just worry about 18-year-old kids saying, oh, I'm a fast metabolizer, I can drink a lot of alcohol, it won't affect me."

Still, said Khoury, "if it's packaged well, it could be a great experience."

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