

Biopiracy: claiming Indian genes in the name of \$cience

By Oscar Johnson, Staff Reporter

For Indian tribes, the alleged discovery of a much coveted "New World" came at the price of Native land and resources. But today's colonizers may be genetic scientists eager to discover the new world of "biopiracy" — the study, alteration and marketing of biological life — and, be it in blood, skin or hair samples, what they now covet is Indian DNA.

As genetic engineering gains momentum in the scientific world, so has the interest in aboriginal DNA — the genetic material in human cells encoding the hereditary traits of indigenous peoples. And with it, an array of corporations eager to lay claim to the genes of full-blooded Indians in order to turn a profit.

The National Institute of Health's Environmental Genome Project is currently targeting two-thirds of the Tribes in the U.S. for genetic research, according to Biologist and Dean of Math and Sciences for Salish-Kootinai College, Judy Gobert.

Similarly, a Stanford University Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP), which is gearing up for an estimated five-year, \$25 million project aimed at "collecting, storing, disseminating and analyzing genetic data on the great human diaspora," also has Gobert and other Native activist concerned.

Activists' reports say HGDP, also dubbed the "Vampire Project" on account of its plan to obtain DNA through blood samples, has targeted roughly 700 indigenous peoples worldwide.

Claiming that no one people has its own unique genetic make up, the project's "global effort to get (genetic) information on ancient popu-

lations" before they fade into the global melting pot appears to favor those with "unusual language, culture or history" as well as those susceptible or immune to particular diseases, according to HGDP's Web site.

Gobert, who spoke at the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians annual

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conference in September, said her tribe was one of many who recently received a letter from researchers requesting hair clippings from its full-blooded female members.

She said that DNA samples are not the only thing geneticists are asking for and few, if any, will guarantee how the material is used or if profits derived from research would be shared.

"They want Native family histories, medical histories and family trees for their data base," said Gobert. "They are laying all the risk on Tribes without any of the benefits."

According to Health and Human Services Division Manager, Cheryl Kennedy, the Grand Ronde Tribe has not yet received any request for Indian DNA samples. Although she does not support biopiracy, she said genetic research that could lead to a cure for diseases that disproportionately effect American Indians such as substance abuse and diabetes would be a welcomed asset.

Similarly, federal and non-profit projects cite scientific discovery and the potential to remedy incurable diseases as the motive behind their research.

Some, such as HGDP, have promised not to patent materials or profit from their research and that if data or materials do become profitable they will "try to guarantee that ... some reasonable financial benefit

would flow back to the sampled populations." But this last minute pledge came only after scores of indigenous organizations from South to North America banded together in protest against the "Vampire Project."

Citing examples of how pharmaceutical and agricultural companies have coopted plant and animal products and their traditional uses from indigenous peoples; genetically altered and/or patented them; and in many cases profited by selling the end products back to the same communities they were taken from, Gobert warned that "big business in this industry is steam rolling this research."

The ethical question of what right scientists and corporations have to lay claim, not only to genetically altered plant and animal products, but human genes and genetic traits are only now being lacklusterly considered by law makers while biopirates clamor to claim such rights in the name of science and industry.

Ownership and hence the right to sell human genetic materials — in the form of U.S. Patents and pending patents include Axys Pharmaceuticals' claims on the genes said to cause blindness and asthma; Columbia University's patent on a baldness gene; and Myriad Genetics pending patent on a brain cancer gene.

But corporate claims do not stop at isolated disease causing genes.

Patent claims have been made on the blood of 24 of the 260-member Hagahai Tribe of Papua New Guinea hoping to develop a lucrative procedure for diagnosing leukemia and a claim on behalf of the U.S. government has been filed for a cell line derived from two Natives of the Solomon Islands.

In both cases the subjects were not consulted about the use of their genes, received no benefit from the research and their genetic make up — the core of their physical identity — is regarded as owned by the patent holders.

In addition to colonizing the very bodies of aboriginal peoples, to what end scientists, corporations and governments might use these genes are virtually unknown by their donors. Not only could it be contrary to their religious and cultural beliefs, but in a global marketplace fueled by profit alone, human genes can be purchased right through the Internet.

One such example is American Type Cultural Collection where Indian and other racially catalogued human cells can be purchased for about \$150 to \$200. The Indian cells came from the Naval Bioscience Lab in Oakland, California and, according to Gobert, were taken from the

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circumcised foreskin of children born to servicemen at the naval hospital.

Even well intentioned researchers seem unable to guar-

antee that raw or altered genetic material will not be used by others for profit, grotesque experiments or even biological weapons, according to activists.

Gobert noted resent arguments by some scientist and politicians that the 10,000-year-old remains of the so-called Kennewick Man unearthed in Columbia park two years ago are not Indian. She said just as certain scientific data is being used to back up such claims, along with genetic research on Native people, it might some day be used to undermine the aboriginal rights of Tribes — allegedly "as proof that we're not from here."

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