

How personalised can healthcare be?

A couple of weeks ago EuropaBio released its Healthcare Manifesto 2009-2010. The message is clear: Put the patient at the centre! Realising that for the first time in human history we have a chance of basing cures and treatments upon the patient's very own biomaterial, we of course should exploit this opportunity to its maximum. And I can only agree.

There ought to be no ethical issues about such an approach. However, there are many practical obstacles to overcome. And then there's the cost to consider. In the manifesto, EuropaBio calls for healthcare systems to put the patient at the centre of any medical, social, economical and ethical consideration. Budgetary considerations should be secondary to this overarching political mandate and its implementation.

However, already there's a debate, at least in Sweden, about treatment of individual patients reaching hundreds of thousands euro per annum, and few healthcare systems have really tackled the potential costs of the analyses and treatments offered by gene tests and gene therapies. A simple thousand dollar personal genetic test could cost many more times that amount as consumers insist on clinical and diagnostic tests to see if they have prostate cancer or if that twinge of pain in their shoulder is actually Rheumatoid Arthritis.

Though some states in the US have tried to limit the activities of personal genetic testing companies the picture of a genetic future with customised diets and medical care is already out there.

In what ever ways politicians, clinicians and industrial scientists tackle these issues let us hope that the solutions they come up with will be practically possible, and affordable. Otherwise humanity loses a fantastic chance of 'curing the incurable' and raising the quality of life to levels hitherto unprecedented. And there are certainly strong and positive trends in biologically based medicines, as the manifesto points out:

'The majority of innovative medicines are made available by applying modern biotechnology in their development and/or manufacturing processes. And more than 600 new biotech medicines and vaccines are being tested for more than 100 diseases, pushing the frontiers of science. Biotech medicines are estimated to account for more than 20% of all marketed medicines and the industry comprised more than 1,700 companies in Europe and represented a market worth more than EUR 17 billion in 2007.'

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