

In the news

SUCCEEDING WHERE OTHERS HAVE FAILED

Jade Williamson tells of spending her childhood wrapped head-to-toe in bandages, with daily trips to the hospital. Eczema sufferers like Jade therefore welcomed the news that the gene that underlies their condition, and also predisposes to asthma, has been identified. The gene encodes filaggrin, which normally keeps foreign bodies out of the skin (*Glasgow Evening Times*, 20 March 2006). Mutation of one gene copy leads to flaky, dry skin, with deletion of both copies leading to severe eczema.

The news, which was published in *Nature Genetics*, was hailed as a “real step forward” by the National Eczema Society, which added: “Above all, it answers the age-old question asked by most eczema sufferers — ‘why?’” (*The Scotsman*, 20 March 2006).

Another interest group said that the discovery held the prospect of a treatment — or even a cure — with “truly life-changing possibilities”. Current treatments tackle the symptoms rather than the cause. “If you imagine the disease as a burning building, up until now we’ve just been throwing buckets of water on the roof”, Irwin McLean, who led the study, told reporters. “It was a really tough project, but because we had experience in this type of gene, we managed to crack it where others had failed”, McLean said (*BBC News*, 20 March 2006).

The research was greeted with delight by most patients with eczema, many of whom have been hoping for a cure since childhood. “Hurry up and make it!” said one (*The Scotsman*). For others, gene discovery is a far step away from a cure: “I keep reading about discovery of new genes. I’m starting to think scientists just like to discover genes out of curiosity”, said a reader of the UK’s *Daily Mail* (20 March 2006).

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DOI:

10.1038/nrg1863

URLs