

In the news

X PRIZE FOR EXPRESS SEQUENCING

A foundation that has previously hit the headlines for accelerating commercial space flights is offering a big cash prize for speeding up genome sequencing. The **X Prize Foundation** will give US\$10 million to the first private team to sequence 100 human genomes in 10 days.

The goal is to drive forward the technology that is needed to understand and use human genetic information. “We need a database of millions of human genomes to help us fully decipher the nature and nurture aspects of human existence”, explained Craig Venter, who is on the X Prize advisory board (*BBC News Online*, 4 October 2006).

The main motivation is an increased understanding of the contribution of genetics to disease. According to its web site, the foundation hopes to “...revolutionize the medical world.” The prize has received support from figures in the public eye who are affected by debilitating conditions. Stephen Hawking, who suffers from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, predicts that “...this prize and the resulting technology can help bring about an era of personalized medicine” (X Prize Foundation web site).

The precise standards that will be required of the winner, in terms of completeness and accuracy, have yet to be confirmed. However, one stipulation has already been decided: the winning team will be asked to follow up their efforts by sequencing the genomes of 100 people chosen by the foundation, including Hawking, Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen and financier Michael Milken (*The New York Times*, 4 October 2006).

The impact that the prize will have in the already fast-moving world of sequencing technology has been questioned by some. Michael Metzker, an academic researcher who is based in Texas and is CEO of a sequencing start-up company, told *news@nature.com* (5 October 2006): “I don’t think the prize money really justifies the effort.”

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URLs

X Prize Foundation: <http://www.xprize.org>

BBC News Online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

The New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com>

news@nature.com: <http://www.nature.com/news/index.html>