

Framingham data not for sale

To staff at Boston University's (BU) in-house venture capital group, Framingham Genomic Medicine sounded like a great idea. Take the data from the massive Framingham Heart Study—which is housed at the BU School of Medicine—and repackage it into digitized databases to sell to drug companies. Academic researchers would continue to have access to raw data as they always have, and Framingham Genomic Medicine would channel part of the profits back into the study.

BU hired a chief scientific officer, raised \$20 million in funding and launched the spin-off last summer (*Nature Med.* 6, 721; 2000). There was only one problem: the National Institutes of Health (NIH), which funds the bulk of the Framingham study, had yet to approve the plan because of concerns about commercial access to data, conflicts of interest and patient confidentiality. However, officials at the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI) said the plan could work with the right safeguards.

But after months of negotiations, the agency and the university failed to come to an agreement over just how strict those safeguards should be and BU and the NHLBI have announced that the deal is off.

Several sticking points torpedoed the project, but the main issue involved access to the publicly funded data. In order to sell the databases, the company would have to give paying customers exclusive access for a period of time, explains Aram Chobanian, the dean of the BU Medical School.

Much of the debate centered on just how long a database built with on publicly funded research should remain proprietary. If the data were returned to the public domain too quickly, there would be little incentive for industry to buy it, notes Chobanian.

The proposal also suffers from bad timing. Increasingly, consumer advocates and ethicists are raising questions about companies that earn huge profits by commercializing government-funded research. And, when it comes to such research, the Framingham study is a bit of a sacred cow. More than 10,000 residents of Framingham, Massachusetts have participated in the study over the past 50 years. The results of their blood

tests, EKGs and X-rays have helped draw clear links between diet, smoking, exercise and heart disease.

One participant, Gerard Desilets, wrote to the local newspaper stating that he felt "betrayed" by the plan to sell the data. "While many of us hoped that our

contributions would lead to life-saving research and discovery, none of us anticipated that our contributions would be sold as a commodity for possible future profits." But as Fred Ledley, the former head of Framingham Genomic Medicine, points out, companies are now free to request access to the raw data anyway.

Tinker Ready, Boston

Watson's 'sun and sex' lecture upsets audience

Nobel Laureate James Watson was keeping quiet last month after reportedly claiming in a lecture that dark-skinned people have a stronger libido than fair-skinned people and that fat people are unambitious.

The 72-year-old who, along with Francis Crick, is credited with working out the structure of DNA, provoked outrage among his audience at the University of California, Berkeley, to whom he also suggested that thin women are unhappy and showed pictures of model Kate Moss to illustrate his point. Some of the audience walked out.

Since the lecture, Watson has refused to give media interviews. A spokesman at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, where Watson is president, said he would discuss his work when he publishes a paper on the subject, probably this spring. The paper is expected to describe research on a gene, *pom-C*, which plays a role in the production of certain hormones. These include leptin, which influences fat metabolism and has been implicated in some depressive disorders, and melanin, the skin pigment. In his lecture, Watson reported the results of experiments in which men were injected with melanin and experienced increased sex drive. He argued that exposure to sunlight would increase melanin levels and produce a surge in libido.

Newspapers reported that Watson's lecture had opened a "transatlantic rift" after two British scientists, Susan Greenfield, president of the Royal Institution, and Lewis Wolpert, of University College, London, refused to condemn him just because his observations were politically incorrect. Wolpert told the *Sunday Times* in Britain, "One cannot censor reliable sci-

ence because one does not like what it tells us."

However, it was precisely Watson's apparent lack of reliable science that upset his critics in California. Susan Marqusee, a professor of biochemistry and molecular biology, told reporters, "there wasn't any science" to support the claims. Thomas Cline, professor of genetics at Berkeley, told *Nature Medicine* that Watson's remarks "communicated a lack of objectivity and rigor, not ...characteristic of his previous work." The anecdotal style was inappropriate for a scientific forum, he says. Cline stresses his own "total ignorance" of the research area and defended the right of any scientist to discuss valid ideas, but says that Watson provided no "believable science" to support his claims.

Watson's approach "puts molecular genetics in a bad light at a time when the subject is under assault on a number of fronts," says Cline. "I was bothered by the failure of Watson to acknowledge that studies of subjects such as the relationship between skin color and libido...just like the relationship between race and IQ, are particularly likely to be misused by those who have unscientific axes to grind. It is for that reason that I believe one should abide by the highest scientific standards when dealing with such subjects."

Wolpert, who was not present at Berkeley but who has heard Watson lecture on "something about sun and sex" in London at another event, similarly professed ignorance of the details of this research area. "The only thing I discuss with Watson is tennis," he says.

Phyllida Brown, Exeter



James Watson