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Biophoto Associates

One-stop shopping for genetic advice

Shopping is a national pastime in the UK, and from next year shoppers in Manchester, in the northwest of England will be able to pick up advice and information on genetics while doing weekly errands.

A 'gene shop' is to be set up on one of the city's busy streets where the general public will be able to drop in for free counselling and advice. The shop, which is the idea of Maurice Super, head of clinical genetics at the Royal Manchester Children's Hospital, will house displays and models of genes and DNA, information on common genetic disorders and genetic testing, and a small studio for videos and lectures.

The search is now on for a suitable site, which, Super says, must be in a busy shopping area that draws all social classes and ethnic groups. The shop will have the same hours and late nights as its fellow traders.

"The aim is to make genetic advice available on the High Street," says Super. "We know from the large number of *ad hoc* calls we get to our unit that there is at least a curiosity about genetics, and worry about personal genes and where the science is taking us."

The gene shop will be run by an administrator with experience in clinical genetics and will be staffed by specialists from the paediatric genetics unit at Children's Hospital. The staff will advise people to see their general practitioner (GP) for referral to a specialist if they think that is necessary. GPs in the area will be informed of the shop's existence.

Funding for the shop has come from the European Union through its Euroscreen research programme, which was set up to look into ethical and philo-

sophical aspects of genetic screening. This pan-European effort is monitoring screening programmes and examining responses to public policy. "We will be doing an audit of the shop — who uses it, what they get out of it, and whether it changes attitudes," says Ruth Chadwick of the University of Central Lancashire, in Preston, northwest England, who is the principal grant holder.

Super does not want the shop to provide only antenatal advice, seeing a wider need for information on genes that are being identified for diseases such as breast cancer, diabetes and heart disease. "We want to try to take the stigma out of being a carrier of certain genetic traits," he says. But he also expects much of the demand to be for antenatal advice and is hoping to highlight disorders such as cystic fibrosis and Down syndrome in collaboration with specialist support groups.

There is also sensitivity that in providing advice on antenatal testing the shop may be perceived as promoting abortion. Consequently, Super intends to invite anti-abortion groups to display information. He is also aware that the presence of the shop may raise false hopes about treatments for inherited diseases.

The shop is one element of Chadwick's £300,000 (US\$465,000) research programme into ethical issues in genetic screening. Funding for the shop will initially be for 18 months. Chadwick is also looking at the implications of genetic testing for the insurance industry, how genetic information will be handled, and at the commercialization of genetic testing.

NUALA MORAN
London

DID YOU KNOW?

UK approves marijuana derivative for cancer patients

The UK government has agreed that the marijuana derivative dronabinol can be prescribed as an antiemetic agent for cancer patients. Dronabinol — an active ingredient of marijuana — will in future be subject to the same restrictions as other controlled substances such as morphine. A spokesperson at the Home Office, the government department with responsibility for administering the Misuse of Drugs Act, said the move had been made in response to recommendations to the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs by the World Health Organization. Anyone found in possession of dronabinol will have to prove it has been prescribed, and drug companies will have to go through a formal registration process with the UK Medicines Control Agency before they can market the drug.

NUALA MORAN
London

Heart surgeon gets a free ticket to ride — for life

Noted cardiac surgeon Panangipalli Venugopal, who performed India's third successful heart transplant in July, has been bestowed with a unique honour: The government-owned Air India will fly him first class anywhere in the world to attend conferences or to carry out research in his field — absolutely free.

"It is a nice gesture," says Venugopal, of the cardiothoracic department at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. "It will be even nicer if I am allowed to endorse the free ticket for other members of my transplant team because it is they who stand to gain more by visits abroad."

Venugopal rose to prominence in August 1994 when he transferred the heart of a brain-dead woman into a 45-year-old man, demonstrating for the first time that such sophisticated surgery can be done in India. He performed the next two operations in quick succession in July of this year.

Heart transplants became possible in India only after the passage last year of legislation that allows surgeons to remove organs from patients who are brain-dead with the consent of close relatives.

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